KABUKIMONOGATARI
DANDY TALE

NISIOISIN

TRANSLATED BY
DANIEL JOSEPH

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Art by VOFAN

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CHAPTER IDLE

MAYOI JIANGSHI

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MAYO I HA CHI KU JI

001

There's a girl I need to tell you about here, now, before I begin talking about that summer and my great adventure over Mayoi Hachikuji. To be clear, this girl didn't accompany me on my adventure, and in fact she wasn't involved with it in any way. When I first met her it was well past summer, and I don't think it would be going too far to say that it was getting on to winter, so there's really no way she could have accompanied me or been involved. To put it simply, she has nothing whatever to do with the tale I want to tell, so why do I want to introduce this completely unrelated person, right here at the outset? Honestly, I don't feel all that confident that I can explain it properly, but how can I put this, she's the type of person who makes you feel that way.

Long story short, when I recall a certain kind of intractable, impossible, godforsaken episode, for some reason this utterly unconnected girl comes to mind along with it□it's like that feeling when you open the second drawer in a bureau and the third one opens as well. Or maybe it's more like when you close the second drawer and the third one opens because of the displaced air pressure. I can't decide which metaphor more aptly expresses her.

They say that if you put soy sauce on custard, it tastes like sea urchin. The two seem unrelated on the surface, and indeed they are completely unrelated, but they end up coming across the same. Call it a paradox of the sensory organs or a trick, but if pressed, I'd say she's like a synthetically colored, artificially flavored carbonated drink with zero-percent fruit juice: the taste is the same, even though it's not the same thing at all□a total fake, an imitation girl.

Difficulty.

Anxiety.

Trouble.

And failure, regret.

Exactly the kind of first-year who seems like she's been packed away in a drawer with all these kinds of things—the new girl, Ogi Oshino.

…Somehow this has turned into a pretty unflattering introduction for a girl who's my junior, but I'm sure if she heard this she would just laugh it off, so I don't think there's anything to worry about. No sense in fretting over it.

Incidentally, it was Kanbaru who first told me about her—about Ogi. I didn't doubt Kanbaru, always peculiarly well informed about cute girls, when she told me a charming new student had transferred into one of the first-year classes, but when I finally met her in person, I wasn't able to dwell on any impression at all.

Mostly because when we first met, she slugged me.

I'll explain why I went to meet her, and why she slugged me, in due course (if I even get the chance, that is)—but what Ogi said, the reason I think of her when I think of these events involving Hachikuji, was this: "Did you know that for the blink of an eye all the traffic lights are red at intersections?"

"What the hell? When the workmen have to run a test or something?"

"No, no, it's much more frequent than that—I bet you yourself see it almost every day."

"Every day… No way, I don't remember ever seeing that. I mean, if that sort of phenomenon occurred all the time, there'd be traffic accidents all over the place."

"It occurs all the time precisely so that there won't be traffic accidents all over the place. What a fool, don't you get it? Listen, it's really quite simple once the cat is out of the bag. From the time the lights on the north-south street turn red to the time the lights on the east-west street turn green, there's always a three-second time lag. Because if they changed at exactly the same time, some

impatient driver would jump the light and the chance of an accident would increase."

"Three seconds… That's more than the blink of an eye. Nobody blinks for three seconds."

"Don't nitpick, it's unbecoming. What I'm saying is, there are three seconds of downtime at an intersection, three seconds when everything stands still—and of course, there's no such thing as a moment when every light turns green at the same time, unless the workmen are actually running a check. If I were the engineer, I would build it into the system so it could never happen. Better safe than sorry, no?"

"Now you're just stating the obvious."

"Then please allow me to state the obvious. I think you'll find it really quite interesting. When the world is awash in the red lights that indicate danger, it's actually safer than at any other time, while a world awash in the green lights that indicate safety is the most dangerous place of all. It's a contradiction—erring on the side of the danger signal creates a safe haven, and erring on the side of the safety signal creates a lawless space where it's tough to survive for even one second, let alone three."

"You're saying it's like…how healthy food tastes bad, and delicious food is basically unhealthy and makes you fat?"

"Yes, that's it exactly. You catch on pretty quickly for someone who's stupid."

"I'm ever so honored by your praise."

"I'm not praising you, I'm being sarcastic. When most people cross with a green light, they feel like God is watching over them, but the fact is it's not like that at all. The risk is simply reduced by half. It's slightly better than every light being green, but that's as far as it goes. If you really want to shun danger, it's better not to cross the street at all."

"If you put it like that, even when you're walking on the sidewalk

the chance is still greater than zero that some drunk driver would zigzag all over the place and hit you."

"Yes, the chance is greater than zero. But that's exactly why I have to state this. Somebody, me for instance, needs to. How dangerous is this place? It's a peaceful world, overflowing with hopes and dreams, brimming with salvation, we're born to love one another and live in harmony, it's kids' duty no less to be happy□when people prattle on intoxicated with such ideas, the rug can be pulled out from under them at any moment. Children in war zones know the truth, even if they're not educated. At least they're hungry for life. Because there are no green lights reflected in their eyes, only red ones."

"I think people have the right to live like idiots in a peaceful country. Isn't that the point of thousands of years of progress?"

"That's such a Japanese way of thinking. You might even call it our religion. But this country called Japan? I don't mind declaring that I don't think it'll exist a thousand years from now."

"That's true of any country. No country maintains the same structure for a thousand years. You don't even need to crack a history textbook to know that."

"Yes, it's obvious. Japan may perish, the world may perish. But everyone averts their eyes from that obvious truth and opens savings accounts. It would be funny, if it weren't so sad."

"And?"

"Pardon me?"

"And what are you actually trying to tell me, Ogi? You're talking nonsense, as usual. You're just like your uncle, even if you don't look a thing alike."

"I'm not pleased to be compared to someone like him. I almost want to sue you for defamation. But as a special service I'll choose to take it as a compliment. Listen, I'm just trying to advise caution. People say it all the time, don't they? 'Dreams are not to be had, but to be

realized.' But it's the other way around, isn't it? If we're really being honest, dreams are not to be realized, but to be had. It's fun to think about your dreams for the future, but when they come true they're drab. Or you end up toiling away day by day, little by little, at work that will probably come to nothing anyway. That's a hellish life. Why do that? It's ridiculous, especially when you can be perfectly happy with your fantasies."

"But wouldn't your happiness quotient be higher if your dreams came true?"

"Absolutely not."

"Oh, no?"

"No. Not a chance. Even if it's something everyone wishes to become, or hopes to be in the future—a rock star, an athlete, a manga artist, a CEO, doesn't matter—it's clear if you just consider what that life would actually be like. You think those kinds of people just do whatever they want to? There's absolutely no way. Worrying about your relationship with your employer, putting yourself at the mercy of rankings and ratings, ingratiating yourself to sponsors or playing up to your fans—it's nothing but a miserable grind. Realizing your dreams equals realizing how dreary your dreams are."

"So the more your dreams come true, the more you have to worry about your relationship to everyone around you? That's a real wet-blanket attitude. I mean, aren't there big shots who get to do whatever they want?"

"Oh, the guy who does whatever he wants and lives out his life eschewed, hated, by the people around him? Who wants to be that guy? Is that a dream come true? Just the opposite."

"Yeah…just the opposite."

"So. We should teach kids that they can be happy so much more efficiently by munching on snacks and staring at images of people whose dreams have come true, beamed to them through a cathode-ray tube, than they can by enduring bitterness and being drowned

in obligations as they strive to transform a pleasant dream into a harsh reality. We've got to be their knights in shining armor. It's entirely admirable to have dreams, but never let them come true. That's the message we should spread."

"Cathode-ray television sets have pretty much gone the way of the dodo… Even though the picture's surprisingly good, I guess. Now it's all LCD and plasma."

"Ha. So both the picture and the shows themselves have become totally flat."

"I swear I wasn't being critical. There are tons of good shows on."

"Who are you trying to please, covering for yourself like that? No one's going to respect you just because you're a nice person. You're the one who has to respect them—the traffic lights. You've got to mind the signals, because they're not going to mind you. With your hands above your head, or waving a little flag, if you like."

That was about how it went.

It was always like that with her. Ultimately, that day Ogi just wanted to tell me her piece of trivia, that "all the traffic lights are red for three seconds at intersections." It seemed like she just wanted to feel proud, to be admired, but ended up talking about life, principles, even dreams. That was fifteen-year-old Ogi Oshino in a nutshell—and I recall that piece of trivia along with Mayoi Hachikuji.

I recall it along with the lost girl.

Every traffic light in her path was red.

Precisely when she crossed with the green, she got run over.

Along with the memory of that girl, who died over ten years ago.

My great adventure that summer, which started from such a small thing, but finally became so massive that it threatened to engulf all reality—it's along with that tale that I recall it.

But after I'm done telling the tale, I might be able to respond to Ogi's trove of trivia, to the girl who always leaves me speechless and overwhelmed, with a retort.

It's this.

Traffic lights have three colors. In between red and green, they turn yellow.

And that's what she was trying to advise.

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“Well, well, well, what have we here? You’re looking well, kind monster sir. I’m relieved, and jealous.”

Just so you know, I have no intention of trying to tell you that running into Yotsugi Ononoki that day—Sunday, August twentieth, the last day of summer break—was the start of it all.

She (if that’s the correct pronoun, which I’m not certain it is, but Ononoki sure looks like an adorable girl of tender years even if she uses the male one herself) was just there, nothing more. If, based on that level of participation, I’m going to lay some of the blame for the incident at her feet, then I ought to have just ignored her instead when she called out to me.

It’s not like Ononoki and I are bosom buddies, or close, or even particularly friendly—in fact, there was a bit of mischief recently where we tried to kill each other over my decidedly un-cute little sister.

Forget ignoring her, I wish I’d gone after her the second I saw her, thank you very much.

Naturally, it was the same for Ononoki, and though I imagine she’d have liked to come after me herself (not a hypothetical, she’s more than capable), and though as always, her emotionless expressionlessness told me exactly nothing about what she was actually thinking, I figured it might be okay to let myself be pleased to hear her voice, however little she seemed to have missed me.

Well, either way.

It’s a good thing when a cute young girl talks to you.

Even if she is an aberration.

Because she's an aberration?

"Ononoki. What's up," I replied.

We were on a sidewalk, at an intersection not all that far from the Araragi residence where I live.

I suddenly realized that a familiar girl wearing a skirt that hid everything down to the ankles was right next to me. It seemed like she noticed me at virtually the same time (strictly speaking, I think she saw me a fraction of a second earlier).

The light was red.

No, in fact it turned green that very moment.

The color that indicates safety.

"Long time□but it hasn't been that long," I said. "Somehow, it feels like forever ago that we saw each other last. But that was recent, huh? Umm…"

I blush to admit that I scoped out our surroundings first.

It's not that I was afraid passersby would witness me in flagrant conversation with a little girl (I've been wiped completely clean of that kind of oversensitivity). I feared a certain onmyoji who employed Ononoki as her shikigami.

Yozuru Kagenui.

She couldn't possibly be□but if Ononoki was here, then the odds were extremely good that Kagenui was paying our town another "visit"… The thought made me nervous.

If it was true, then "onslaught" was the right word.

When she stands, mayhem; when she sits, destruction; her walk, like terrorism□if at all possible, I wanted to avoid ever laying eyes on her again.

A reunion was one thing.

A rematch was out of the question.

She wasn't nearby, as far as I could tell. She wasn't the type to conceal herself (Kagenui won't even set foot on the ground, part of some who-knows-what-ism), so if I didn't see her right off the bat, I could probably relax for the moment…

"You don't need to worry, kind monster sir. Sister isn't with me. I, Yotsugi Ononoki, am here alone." Recognizing my precautions (perhaps "suspicious behavior" would better describe my actions) for what they were, Ononogi beat me to the punch before I could even ask. "It's not like me and sister are together everywhere, all the time, so you can do me a favor and not always think of us as a set. Rather than one set, we're a two-man cell."

"Uh huh…" I certainly hoped that was true. Kagenui was, well… I guess she's more a good person than a bad one (some even say she embodies justice), but given our natures, we're hardly compatible. "In that case, though, you're one free familiar. Speaking of which, Ononoki, when we first met, weren't you also alone and lost?"

"I wasn't lost. Don't insult me. I was just asking for directions."

"Isn't that the definition of being lost?"

"If asking for directions is all it takes to be lost, then every child in the world is a lost child. People say it all the time, don't they? To ask is a moment's shame, not to ask, a lifetime's."

"I suppose so."

"They also say that to answer is a moment's smugness, not to answer, a lifetime's."

"No proverb is that nasty."

Since Ononoki was always aloof, it was tough to tell whether or not she was joking, but just to be sure I played the straight man. She didn't seem particularly thrilled, nor upset at having been corrected, so I still didn't know if it had been the right move.

What a difficult kid.

I wasn't asking her to be wildly expressive, but couldn't she at least display a little emotion like a normal kid her□wait.

"Hey, Ononoki."

"What?"

"I knew something didn't feel right… When we met before, didn't you have a weirder way of speaking? All your lines ended with 'he said with a dashing look,' if I remember correctly."

"Shut your hole."

A curt imperative, in a low voice□so low I couldn't tell who'd spoken.

It dripped with emotion.

Regret, bitterness, whatever it was, a dark emotion.

"It's a sore spot in my history."

"…"

Right. All right.

She'd realized how painful it was. I had no idea if it had been on her own or if someone had pointed it out to her, but judging from how low that voice was, it seemed like the latter…

"I'm never, ever doing a dashing look again."

"Well, you never did in the first place. But, Ononoki."

I wanted to keep needling her, but I considered her feelings, refrained, and skipped ahead to the next topic.

Generously, you might say.

Gotta be kind to little girls, whether or not they're human.

That's the Koyomi Araragi way.

“Why are you here?” I asked.

“Why? Now, now, kind monster sir, where do you get off putting such a question to me? Is this whole town your backyard? I didn’t realize entry was prohibited without prior authorization. My apologies.”

“…”

I didn’t get her characterization.

She might’ve dropped her odd catchphrase, but her peculiar way of speaking was alive and well□or rather, thanks to that expressionless face, it would always be disquieting.

I’ll just come right out and say, it was like talking to a robot.

“Although it’s not my backyard,” I played along, generously, “it’s my town. So if you’re planning anything strange□”

“You’ll stop me?”

“Nope, I was thinking I’d give you a hand.”

“What a chump…” She looked appalled. Or actually, her face didn’t change. “Are you assuming I wouldn’t be up to any mischief?”

“I wonder. But apart from the fact that I’m an inhuman half-vampire and you guys are ghostbusters specializing in immortals, there’s really no reason for us to be enemies.”

“There’s no getting away from that fact, is there?”

I came because I was called, she told me.

She sounded completely indifferent.

It didn’t even feel like an explanation.

“You might say I was dispatched. I am a shikigami, after all. I don’t know the details. I’m not all that interested in whom I fight. You’re willing to trust me, but I butcher women and children without

mercy if I'm ordered to."

"Butcher…"

Why reach for such a crude word?

She didn't sound used to mouthing it, at all.

Of course, her finishing move, Unlimited Rulebook, which consisted mostly of exceptions, really could "butcher" most foes.

"Whatever," I said. "I don't know what you're planning to do, or on whose orders, but just don't bust up my town too badly."

"Okay. Sister isn't here this time, so no worries on that count."

"Small comfort."

"By the way."

"Yeah?"

"How's your master? Well, I don't know if you're the master these days, but…that…you know…"

"Oh, you mean Shinobu," I filled in the blank□eyeing my shadow. "She's asleep at this time of day. We're a two-man cell ourselves, you see. Then again, there's nothing we can do about being one set as well."

"Indeed."

Ononoki nodded, totally expressionless. But she clearly seemed relieved, on some profound level. That, at least, was plain. Kagenui had really put me through the wringer, but Shinobu had put Ononoki through the wringer too…

Not like we would actually admit it to each other, but we had both been deeply traumatized by the experience.

"That half-assed vampire doesn't scare me one bit, of course."

"…"

This shikigami was cute when she was bluffing.

When I glanced over, I saw that the signal had turned red at some point. Actually, we'd been talking like that for a while, so it had probably changed any number of times. In fact, it turned green again right then.

"Let's cross."

"Sure."

I crossed the street side by side with Ononoki.

Not that we raised our hands or held them.

Uhmm.

What was going on here?

Whatever scenario Ononoki was involved in this time, it didn't seem to have anything to do with me… In other words, anyway you sliced it, I shouldn't get involved.

That said, parting ways just as I came to that realization would be kind of a shame. Though, true, if she were in town because of me or Shinobu, it'd be much safer to beat a hasty retreat.

"Ononoki. Just to be clear, you sure you aren't lost?"

"You're like a broken record. But I'll go ahead and ask you for directions, if it'll make you happy."

"No need…"

"I'll go ahead and let you buy me some ice cream, if it'll make you happy."

"Even less need."

And way too transparent.

This wasn't the big city, and there weren't convenience stores selling ice cream on every corner.

But wasn't there a shop just a little farther along?

Maybe they sold ice cream there?

It was summertime, after all.

"All right, I'll buy some for you."

"What the hell are you talking about, kind monster sir? The whole thing was obviously just a joke."

"I'm not the sort of guy who gets jokes."

"Nope, I can't let you buy me Häagen-Dazs."

"That joke, I get."

"Chocolate Fondant, please."

"Don't bring up limited-time-only flavors. People are going to find out what a grueling schedule these books are written on."

I did end up treating her to an ice cream bar.

Not that it cost enough to brag about.

They didn't even have Häagen-Dazs.

Never mind eating it right there in the store, eating while walking is bad manners, so we sat down amidst a nearby shrubbery.

That would be just as unseemly for a lone high school student as eating while walking, but with a little girl beside you? A scene so charming, you couldn't make it up if you tried.

Not like she was totally botching it or anything, but Ononoki was having some trouble unwrapping the ice cream, so I lent her a hand.

"By the way, kind monster sir. There's something I want to ask before I say thank you."

"I'd rather you just said a normal thank you, but what is it?"

“Actually, there’s something that’s been bothering me for a while… It wouldn’t be an oversight to say I called out to you because of it.”

“You mean an overstatement.”

“Did someone give you that backpack?”

With the hand that wasn’t holding her ice cream bar, Ononoki pointed at the backpack I was wearing.

Well, well. I mean, it was the perfect size for me□but too big for, say, a fifth-grade girl to wear.

In fact…

“Uh, no, it wasn’t given to me.” Careful to keep it away from the ice cream, I took off the backpack and set it down beside me. I don’t know what was in there, but it was plenty heavy. “Hachikuji left it behind.”

“Left it… Sorry, I shouldn’t have asked. She’s gone, then.”

“No, not that kind of ‘left behind,’ nothing so dire. It’s not a keepsake or anything,” I explained. “She came to hang out in my room today. She’s so scatterbrained, she took off without her goddamn backpack.”

“Huh… It doesn’t suit you, kind monster sir.”

“Leave off. It’s not mine, of course it doesn’t.”

“The belt is all droopy. You look like an idiot.”

“Watch what you say.”

“Oh, sorry,” Ononoki apologized, and reconsidered her words.

That was unexpectedly straight of her.

“The belt is all droopy. People will know you’re an idiot.”

“Too unexpectedly straightforward!”

“So a big backpack is something you can forget.”

“Well… Granted, she rarely takes it off, but today she seemed tired. She even fell asleep on my bed. On my goddamn bed, okay?”

“Is that part really so important?”

“That’s when she took off the backpack and chucked it into the corner. And when she split, she just left it there. That’s why I’m out here, hot on her heels: so I can give it back.”

I’d meant to be hot on her heels, anyway, but I hadn’t so much as laid eyes on that sprightly little power walker. So really, I was just drifting along—I should have taken my bike.

To be perfectly honest, I’d pretty much given up on finding Hachikuji and was feeling pretty dispirited when Ononoki called out to me.

“But she haunts the streets, doesn’t she? Can a ghost like that really come and hang out at your house? Wow…”

“Yeah, wow. Even I have to admire how free she is.”

After the Lost Cow to-do, Hachikuji received a special two-rank promotion from place-bound ghost to wandering ghost, so even though she haunts the streets, she’s not bound to them (I think). In which case it wasn’t all that surprising.

“Wait a sec,” I said. “Rewind. You knew Hachikuji?”

“Don’t act like you don’t remember, kind monster sir. Or should I say, kind monstieur.”

“Enough with the weird nicknames. Monstieur?”

It might stick.

It was in character, so to speak.

“Brogre,” she suggested.

“Give it up already.”

“Wasn’t she right next to you the first time we met, kind monster sir?”

“Was she? Right, now that you mention it.”

“A monster-ghost duo. An extraordinarily rare sight, even for someone in my position—which is why I spoke to you that time, too. I was most definitely not lost.”

“…”

It came off as a total lie. It was hardly written on her expressionless face, but maybe she was just that bad of a liar.

Quite a contrast—with Hachikuji.

“Something left behind by a ghost, though, that’s the rarest of the rare,” remarked Ononoki. “How did she become a ghost in the first place?”

“Who knows.”

I knew, of course, but deflected the question.

That’s me, Koyomi the Deflector.

It’s not like it would have been so complicated to explain, but it involved Hachikuji’s private—no, more acutely, her identity.

Maybe it would have been fine to talk to Ononoki about it. After all, she was an aberration like Hachikuji, but on the other hand, maybe that was all the more reason to be circumspect.

“I started out human too.”

“Huh?”

I was totally caught off-guard by Ononoki’s unexpected declaration. Actually it felt more like a sudden confession than an unexpected declaration.

“Nothing to be so surprised about. You started out human, too, didn’t you? Or wait, according to sister, you’re still human.”

“Who knows? It’s a little ambiguous… But now that you mention it, it was never clear to me, Ononoki. Exactly what kind of an aberration are you?”

“That’s a tough one. I’m a shikigami, but sister made me on her own, with a lot of original components, so I□well, that being said, basically I’m a tsukumogami.”

“Tsukumogami? Like where a tool used for a hundred years develops a soul, or bears a grudge against its owner if it gets thrown away? Or have I got it wrong?”

“You’re more or less on the money,” Ononoki nodded her approval of my dimly recalled knowledge. “But I’m a human tsukumogami.”

“Come again?”

“A tsukumogami made from a human who was used for a hundred years…or perhaps I should say a corpse tsukumogami. Sister told me to keep it a secret, but oh well.”

Because if I told anyone, they’d have to die□was Ononoki’s unsettling follow-up.

Or is unsettling the wrong word?

Thanks a lot for providing me with that info.

You got a problem with me or something?

Maybe you do with Shinobu, but don’t take it out on me.

Give me back that ice cream bar.

“Um, so, Ononoki, even though you look like a kid, you’re really over a hundred years old?”

“Not a chance. I’m not some crusty old senior citizen,” Ononoki shook her head. Naturally, someone who treated Shinobu like an

old hag would have some bizarre hang-ups about her own age. “This life of mine started when sister resurrected me.”

“Resurrected□?”

“Yeah, so I died once. I died, and came back. Onmyoji are well versed in the art of raising the dead, after all□and you know what, kind monster sir? Do you have any idea what the difference is between you and me? Not to mention that ghost kid, Hachikuji?”

“Difference? I mean, aren’t we completely different?”

Vampire.

Ghost (place-bound → wandering).

Shikigami.

All three could be classified under the aberration rubric, but as a category, that was like mammals…or even more vaguely, vertebrates.

The real question was, did we have anything in common?

“Of course we have something in common,” Ononoki asserted. “We were all human once.”

“Oh… I see. But if you factor it out like that, this time the differences disappear, don’t they? Me, you, Hachikuji, all three of us started out human, then died□”

“And I’m saying the way we died is different. You’re immortal. You became immortal at the moment of death. In other words, you were never strictly speaking dead.”

Immortal.

Without death.

So I don’t die.

“In other words, kind monster sir, it’s not that you and that other

vampire died and came back to life. It's more proper to say that you live on, undying."

"Hmmm…"

Well.

Sounded like semantics to me, but maybe she was right.

"I, on the other hand, died. Really died. And I came back to life after I died. But my life, and my fate, are considerably different than they were before. In fact, I think it's more proper to say that I was reborn."

"Reborn."

"Yes. I didn't even inherit the memories of my old life—I'm a completely different being. And as for that ghost girl," Ononoki went on, her eyes fixed on Hachikuji's backpack, "she hasn't come back to life—she died, and she's still dead, no coming back. That's what a ghost is. A ghost doesn't go on living, it's not reborn—if anything, I'd say it goes on in death."

"…"

"Listen, kind monster sir. Think about what I've been saying, and tell me: which one of us do you think is happiest? Personally, I think all three of us are fortunate in our own ways—we're all lucky. Most people die, and that's it. To retain one's consciousness after death, I'd call that good fortune."

"…Can you really make a blanket statement like that?"

I—couldn't answer Ononoki's question.

I didn't know what to say about who was happiest—and in the first place.

Can you really call that good fortune?

I don't know.

I mean, didn't I go through hell during spring break because of it? Didn't Hachikuji wander lost for over ten years because of it?

And Ononoki herself—if she was asking me, I have a hard time believing she considered herself happy.

In fact…

In fact…

"Have you ever thought about why you were born?"

Since I couldn't answer—

She just asked another question.

Not only did she not hold back.

She pressed even harder.

It almost felt like an accusation—even an interrogation, like she really did have something against me.

Why?

What was her problem with me?

"I thought about it a lot back when I was in middle school. Never found an answer, though."

"I've thought about it constantly since the day I was born. Or more precisely, since the day I died? No, I've thought about it constantly since the day I was reborn. About how there must be some kind of meaning—and if not, how I perhaps shouldn't be here."

"…"

Because you're an aberration.

Because you're abnormal, irrational.

Every aberration has its reasons—was that something that Mèmè Oshino said?

Even if humans aren't born for any reason, aberrations are…

"Or maybe it's really the meaning of my death. I thought maybe you'd be able to answer me. You seemed to have some pretty badass stuff to say to sister, after all."

"No…I don't have an answer to that," I said, choosing my words carefully. I said to the expressionless aberration sitting next to me eating ice cream and asking tough questions, "I don't think Hachikuji could answer you, either. If that's the reason you asked me how she became a ghost."

"Of course that's why."

"She didn't become a ghost because she wanted to, just like I didn't become a vampire because I wanted to. Things simply happened as they did, that's all."

"Sure, same for me."

"Not really. It sounds like in your case, it was thanks to Ms. Kagenui's resolute intent."

"Sister's…"

"It didn't simply happen… It wasn't just the way things went, there was resolute intent. Although what her intent was, I can't even begin to imagine… Is it really right for an immortal-hunting ghostbuster to go around raising the dead, anyway?" When she's asked why she specializes in immortal aberrations, apparently Kagenui replies, Because there's no such thing as going too far□(in my opinion, she did go too far even so)□and yet Ononoki, a familiar in her service, has experienced death. "Maybe raising the dead doesn't create an immortal aberration? Feels like an arbitrary, or… convenient rationale."

"It's like I told you. When a dead human comes back to life, that's very much not immortality."

Which is why I want to know, she continued.

The reason I came back to life.

The reason I was reborn.

“Why sister resurrected me.”

“I can’t answer that question, but I really don’t think you’d be satisfied whatever the reason, or meaning,” I said. This was a problem that didn’t have a correct solution, but at least I could give a sincere answer. I said sincerely, “There are no satisfying answers to the big questions. Because life is just a parade of absurdities.”

Even if you haven’t become an aberration.

Regular life is preposterous enough.

Total incomprehensibility that’s the world for you.

“Maybe,” conceded Ononoki. “It may well be that the world is absurd and preposterous. But if so, is there any reason to keep on living in such a world through death, through rebirth…besides some lingering attachment? That’s what I wonder.”

Ononoki had finished her ice cream bar but kept chewing on the stick as if she was making sure of the flavor.

Bad manners, just like a kid.

And expressionless, as always.

But perhaps it also signified that she was getting irritated.

She added, “It feels like when a series that should have ended just keeps grinding along forever, like you’ve already watched the final episode but suddenly there’s a sequel.”

“What on earth could you be referring to…”

Why beat yourself up about it?

Why not just call it Season Two?

“I just can’t bear to watch a show go on when it seemed like it had

wrapped up so nicely. Don't you agree, kind monster sir?"

"Do I agree?"

That was a hard question to answer.

For a variety of reasons.

"If you're asking me whether it's better to go out on a high note or to tarnish your legacy, I'd go with the former, but maybe that's just me. Speaking for myself, it's not like nothing good has happened since I became a vampire."

No.

In fact, there've been plenty of good things.

It terrifies me to imagine my life ending with spring break—what a lonely life that would have been.

I didn't become close with Senjogahara or Kanbaru until after I became a vampire—and if I had died during spring break, I never would have been reunited with Sengoku.

And.

Meeting Hachikuji—

"So, what you're saying, kind monster sir, is that Hachikuji became a ghost so she could get to know you."

"No, it's not like that at all… How does that figure? She had her own reasons, she got lost, lost in this world—though she already dealt with those reasons, achieved her goal, over three months ago…"

"Oh yeah? Then why is she still hanging around as a ghost? If she doesn't have a reason, doesn't have any lingering attachments?"

"Well…"

I really don't know anything about that.

Seems like she herself doesn't, either.

Or maybe it's just an act.

"Come to think of it, my beloved class president said something… What was it, what was the occasion… That all life, not just human life, is the result of someone, or something's, fervent desire."

"The result of desire."

"Whatever it is, the feeling 'I want that to exist' gave birth to it so saying you wish you hadn't been born, or were different, misses the point entirely. Even if it's not the result of your desire, the fact that it is there, in the way it is there, is the fulfillment of someone's desire." Was it over spring break? Or Golden Week? Or maybe after the culture festival? Tsubasa Hanekawa said something like that. "A car driving along a road is there because someone wanted there to be a car an airplane flying through the sky is there because someone wanted to fly through the sky."

Ononoki was here because a violent onmyoji wanted her to come back to life.

Although I'd said things just happened as they did, that it was just the way they went, in that sense, I became a vampire because somebody wanted me to.

And Hachikuji Hachikuji…

What about Hachikuji?

Even if she had been waylaid by a snail of her own volition.

The fact that she is as she is now whose desire was being fulfilled her own, in the end?

Or.

Then again.

"Reeks of hypocrisy, don't it?"

Seemed like Ononoki wasn't satisfied, after all. She was so unsatisfied that her speech got cruder.

Don't say "don't it."

Young lady.

"I guess it's less hypocritical than preachy. Just like something a class president would say. She should be class president for life, don'cha think?"

"Who're you supposed to be? Go back to the way you normally talk."

"Everything is the result of somebody's desire□well, maybe it is. Even wars start because someone wants them to. It's not just battle mania like with sister; someone's profiting. Don't you think?"

"Well… If you insist on putting it unpleasantly, then yeah, something like that."

"Same goes for Backpack Girl."

"Well," I replied honestly, giving voice to what I'd been thinking, "I really don't know. But by that logic, it must be the result of someone's desire. Whether it's an aberration or a ghost, nothing is born unless someone wants it to be."

"Hmmm."

Still sounds hypocritical, Ononoki objected.

"All right then, kind monster sir. Next time you see that girl, ask her for me. When you return her backpack, or on your next bedroom date."

"Ask her what for you?"

"Haven't we been over this?" Standing up, Ononoki said, "Whether she's happy as a ghost."

Like it was time for her close-up, she said it with a dashing look.

Still expressionless, of course.

003

In the end, I never found Hachikuji.

In the end, Ononoki asked me for directions, and even after we parted (that is, after her remark “I always want something salty after I eat something sweet” prompted me to buy her a rice cracker at the same store in the way of a souvenir. What an expensive young girl), I kept on searching for Hachikuji. But she eluded my grasp, right down to the tips of her pigtails.

Seemed like she’d already gone home.

Or gone home doesn’t sound quite right, seeing as she had neither a home to go to nor a way to get there.

So should I simply say she went?

Or that she left?

Or even, bluntly, she vanished?

Makes me sad to think about.

Helplessly sad.

It wasn’t because of Ononoki’s interrogation I was always thinking about it. All the time.

No matter how brave a face she put on, no matter how sunny her disposition, those feelings were headed down a one-way street, not even passing by anything, and Mayoi Hachikuji, that no-longer-living girl, was steeped in tragedy.

After all is said and done.

Death is harsh.

Death is a massive, towering barrier.

Take me, for instance. Over spring break when a vampire sucked my blood and I was stripped of my humanity, I gained an absurd amount of power and became absurdly weak in the face of the sun or a crucifix, and even now the after-effects linger absurdly in my body, and I keep absurdly engaging these aberrations—that's not at all what I'd call happiness.

Am I happy? I can't say that I am.

Of course, this body has saved my life, and to be honest those after-effects do come in handy—but there's no way around it, misery is misery.

I was maybe putting on a bit of a show for Ononoki when I said there were good things about it, and there really had been good things, but you still can't just spin misery into joy—not every cloud has a silver lining.

The sadness of giving up your humanity—I understand it better than anyone.

But after-effects and partial immortality aside, at least I still have a body.

I possess flesh.

Hachikuji doesn't even have that.

Let alone a body and a mind—it's doubtful that she even has whatever it is that we call our heart.

If anything, I'd call her a shadow.

Yes.

All she has is her abnormality, which is why her existence is irrational.

She is an aberration.

Not a living aberration—a dead aberration.

On that Mother's Day when I started going out with Senjogahara, Hachikuji was released from a sort of curse thanks to Oshino's clever scheme, but nevertheless, her current situation still doesn't seem proper.

I have no idea what to think about it.

No idea at all.

Passing on doesn't necessarily mean happiness for a ghost—I don't really know, but everyone seems to think it's inevitable, that it's a milestone like getting married or getting a job or something, but maybe it isn't like that at all.

Wandering isn't always bad.

It can be good to lose your way.

It suits some people, like Oshino, to drift forever—and maybe I'm even less moored to any religious outlook since I became a half vampire, but I can't help thinking that, for Hachikuji, to pass on is no blessing.

Depending on how you look at it, the idea that it's proper to pass on is really high-handed.

In fact, going on as a kind of guardian angel for the town as she has been might be a form of happiness.

It's meaningless to insist on what's proper. What's the point?

At least now, she seems to be having fun.

She seems happy.

…And I do understand how meaningless it is to think about all this stuff.

What I think, how I feel.

What I may know has nothing to do with it.

I'm not speaking rhetorically, I'm not being tactful. They really, truly have nothing to do with it.

What matters is how Hachikuji feels—what she thinks about her situation, what she's feeling, that's what's crucial. How I feel, or even how Hanekawa (who's quite taken with her) feels, is all completely irrelevant.

It's sad.

Just how irrelevant it is.

If she enjoys going on not as a place-bound ghost but as a wandering ghost, chatting with people who talk to her on the street—that's good enough for me.

No need for anyone to butt in with his opinion.

That expert I mixed it up with the other day, Ononoki's "sister" and so-called embodiment of "justice" Yozuru Kagenui, sees "immortal aberrations" like vampires as her enemy—and roundly condemned "it" as wrong.

She may have a point.

I certainly didn't get it when we were facing each other, but looking at it more calmly now, I understand what she was trying to say.

Not because Ononoki is cute—I do think so, deep down.

Whether I want to or not.

It's so simple, even I can comprehend it.

Neither extreme logic nor extreme sentimentality yields great meaning—if you probe people's principles to their conclusions, you arrive at "good things are good" and "bad things are bad."

At the very least, I don't want anyone to pity me for this half-immortal body, much less commiserate with me.

The only person who's allowed to grieve for me is me.

So if a technocrat like Kagenui, or Oshino, showed up—or maybe this example will be easier to understand—if that God guy showed up and said, "I'll turn you back into a proper human being"—I would just silently shake my head. Thanks but no thanks. To put it bluntly, that would be an unwelcome gift.

I've set myself on this path.

A lifetime's burden, a lifetime's journey.

Not even God can tell me otherwise.

So—it's the same with Hachikuji.

Of course, it would be another story if she asked me to help her fix her current situation, but—I really have no idea what she thinks, about anything.

Not a thing.

Not one iota of mutual understanding has come out of our pleasant banter and fun talk.

The most important question remains unasked.

I'm sure I won't be able to ask her the question Ononoki wants me to—I can't ask her anything.

Because she won't tell me anything.

What do you want to do?

What are you feeling?

Isn't there anything I can do for you? I so desperately want to know the answers, but the questions remain unasked.

I want to help you fulfill your wishes, but—

"Then help her fulfill them. Why the pretense of concern, thou cretin? Art thou still going through puberty?"

“…”

After dinner I went back to my room to think things over, and before I knew it, what you might call the dead of night had arrived, and a little blond vampire girl had appeared right in front of me, like a light with a sensor that switches on automatically come dark.

Well just make yourself at home, why don’t you.

Not a speck remained of her original taciturn, inactive character.

“Feh, I couldn’t bear to watch. Bringing that girl over here, making kissy face all day long.”

“Enough with the outdated lingo.”

“A thousand pardons. My Edo-period habits die hard.”

“Not that outdated.”

“Wilt thou hear my impression of Ietsugu Tokugawa?”

“Who? I don’t know anything about the, what, seventh Tokugawa shogun?”

“Seems that ye do.”

Well.

We do have a student preparing for exams here.

“‘Ho, that’s nigh on the Edicts on Compassion for Living Things!’”

“Huh? Did he become all the rage with his grandpa’s dad jokes or something?”

Don’t be wasting my time.

Plus, the period was off… All things considered, didn’t this little blond girl, Shinobu Oshino, she who was once Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, visit Japan somewhat before Ietsugu’s time?

“I caught wind of it overseas. Word of Ietsugu reached the four corners of the Earth.”

“He was that interesting?”

Wasn’t that during the era of national isolation?

Maybe word spread through the Dutch traders at Nagasaki?

“Don’t waste my time with this just because no one can confirm any of it. I’ve got my entrance exams coming up, and you’re going to throw my Japanese history all out of whack.”

“Well, to tell it true, I don’t know Ietsugu from Adam.”

“Oh no?”

“I based my impression of Ietsugu on a recorded narration I heard at Nagoya Castle.”

“…”

In other words, before she came here, before spring break, she was sightseeing at Nagoya Castle?

Hope you enjoyed yourself.

And what’s the deal with this series’ references to Nagoya□Doala and the Chunichi Dragons and all.

Before long I’ll be coming out with their local slang.

Or eating the strawberry pasta from Mountain Café.

“In any event, my master’s licentiousness makes me want to shield mine eyes. So ’tis with Miss ’Gahara, and so with Sister ’Basa.”

“You’re a vampire, don’t be calling them Miss ’Gahara and Sister ’Basa.”

Don’t get overfamiliar with the human realm.

And “Sister ’Basa” is nowhere in the original.

Go easy on the crossovers.

“Wait a sec,” I asked, “does that mean that when Hachikuji was over here this afternoon, you were awake?”

“I was half asleep, but ye were so excited that the other half was awake. Something like that exercise where ye stand on one leg with thine eyes closed.”

“So you were testing your physical fitness in my shadow.”

Hell of a gym to join.

But because excitement—in fact any condition—flows between Shinobu Oshino and me, paired as we are via my shadow, when I’m all excited about something like the unthinkable occasion of Hachikuji being in my house, it was like the night before a field trip for her. No wonder she couldn’t sleep.

While it isn’t a complete reversal of day and night, I’m still forcing a pretty irregular lifestyle on a vampire, about which I do feel bad.

Not that I’m gonna apologize or anything.

Then again, given that she didn’t bring it up, she must’ve been sleeping the whole time I was chasing after Hachikuji and having my ice cream date with Ononoki.

I took solace in the thought.

Shinobu and Ononoki were like oil and water; Ononoki felt traumatized by Shinobu, and Shinobu simply couldn’t stand Ononoki.

I’d be helpless if she tried to take it out on me.

…You know, I’m starting to think that maybe I should do something about my habit of making peace with my opponents just like that.

Now that I’m saying it, though, Shinobu herself was my opponent once upon a time.

“Fine, fine,” she said, “I jest about the standing on one leg part, but the closed eyes was not altogether untrue. Did I not tell thee? ’Twas a sight from which I would fain shield mine eyes.”

“Well…”

Sadly, I guess the sight of her “master” getting all woo-hoo over a girl doesn’t command a lot of respect.

“Forsooth, that young lady was defenseless, asleep on thy bed□how could ye cop not even a single feel, thou chicken? ’Twas the perfect time to go for it.”

“Is that what you expect from me?!”

Although to all appearances she’s an eight-year-old girl, Shinobu is actually a 500-year-old vampire, a wily veteran. Even Kanbaru can’t compare to her when it comes to sexual profligacy.

Age and gender have absolutely no bearing.

The talk about Ietsugu aside, when you’ve lived through so many different ages, you know, it’s natural to, you know, get like that.

“Ten is a fine age to be wed.”

“Nope. Not in modern times.”

“Do not take this amiss, but it seems to me that for the species to flourish, humans should wed upon the advent of menstruation.”

“No character could be harder to adapt for anime than you.”

No wonder she didn’t utter a single word.

I hear they made her talk like a vocaloid for the drama CD…

“Fine, fine, art thou saying my notions are better suited to a period piece?”

“What, are you making dad jokes?”

That wasn’t even funny.

She could just go get restricted by the new statutes.

Season Two will be proceeding without you.

“But,” said Shinobu, smiling.

A gruesome smile.

The gap□or gape, was frightful.

No way it could be adapted for anime.

“Even if she cannot match my 500 years, that young lady is not so young as she appears, if I may. Her form remains as it was when she died, but in truth she must be older than thee.”

“Well…”

Mayoi Hachikuji.

She died ten-odd years ago.

Hit by a car while crossing with the green□and since then, she’s been wandering the streets of this town, on and on, for over ten years□

I don’t know when her birthday is so I can’t say precisely, but either way she’s definitely over twenty, and therefore older than me.

She was my big sis.

“Indeed. And thus presents no legal issue, even in this modern world.”

“Laws don’t even apply to ghosts.”

Also, it’s not that simple.

Her age got fixed when she died.

When you look at it that way, Hachikuji is even more constant than Shinobu, more immortal than immortal.

Not living on, not risen—she's dead, so she can no longer live, or die.

Even vampires age—even Shinobu has, and she's 500 years old.

But Hachikuji is Hachikuji.

Eleven years old for all eternity.

Dead as she is.

"Fine, fine. Better than being pubescent for all eternity, is it not?"

"What a distinction."

It wasn't helping.

What the hell was she talking about, pubescent.

You talking about me?

"First of all," I said, "the most important thing isn't legal blah blah, it's Hachikuji's feelings."

"One can never truly surmise a girl's feelings towards marriage."

"Oops. The tables have turned."

"In any event, listen well. What I wish to tell thee is that worrying over it is fruitless."

"Huh? That's what you wanted to say?"

It wasn't what she'd been saying at all.

You were egging me on to assault Hachikuji just now, weren't you?

When the hell did you surmise what I was worrying about?

Don't act like you were being all serious from the start, it makes me look like a fool.

"'Tis a waste of time for thee to consider what that young lady

wants to do, or what she wants to be. Thou shouldst not even ask."

"Shouldn't even ask."

"In any case, there is naught thou couldst do. Though in my excitement I did suggest that ye aid her in fulfilling her wishes, thou more than anyone must know the impossibility of doing so."

"…"

"Thou wert unable to do aught for Miss 'Gahara, nor for Sister 'Basa. In the end, those two overcame their trials on their own."

"What, did you become friends with those two behind my back or something?"

Getting a little familiar, aren't we?

Really.

I seem to recall nothing but hostility between you and Hanekawa, and as for Senjogahara, I'm pretty sure you've never spoken a word to each other.

When did your character get so friendly?

"Indeed, 'tis most peculiar. I cannot bring myself to hate those two, though I know not why. Likely 'tis due to our pairing, by dint of which thine influence extends even to my preferences, even to love and hate."

"Huh…"

So we were that deeply connected□if it went that far, it was more like telepathy than pairing.

"My desire to bang that young lady likely comes from thine influence as well."

"I have no such unseemly desire!"

Always trying to pass the buck!

You're a succubus all on your own!

"…Hang on," I said. "If we're really splitting hairs here, we were just a set before our pairing, before you got sealed in my shadow, in other words back during spring break. And originally, that came from you. Because in the beginning you were the master, and I was the servant. In other words, just as you're under my influence now, I was under your influence during spring break. So does that mean my cool character crumbling back then□"

"Gulp."

"Gulp, is it?!"

Some unexpected truths were coming out thanks to the continuation of the series.

I guess there were some benefits to prolonging this thing.

"Fine, fine. But let us return to the subject at hand. We'll lose our readers if we keep on with this idle chatter."

"Yeah? Well, I for one would like to stick with this subject a little longer…"

It feels reaaaally important.

Important enough to shake the foundations of the whole tale.

"Yet if we do nothing but chatter away, there may be another coup d'état. Sister 'Basa got rave reviews as a narrator for always getting straight to the point."

"I suppose you're right…"

In fact, there was some push for Hachikuji to narrate this volume.

I guess they really considered it.

Incidentally, there were a lot of reasons they didn't go with that plan, but apparently one of the primary ones was that they were concerned I would come off terribly if the tale unfolded from

Hachikuji's viewpoint (unlike, say, Hanekawa's more forgiving one); they took pity on me.

I'd been pitied…

What a bummer.

"Well, leaving aside things that haven't happened chronologically speaking, you're right. There really is nothing I can do for Hachikuji."

It wasn't like there was an enemy to fight.

If there were opponents, all I needed to do was defeat them, but as so often happens in real life, it wasn't that kind of story.

Defeating something, beating somebody, in dramatic, world-altering fashion—that only happens in video games and sports. It's never that straightforward in the real world.

What I—what we have to face is not even absurd, or preposterous—often, it's just plain old reality.

Reality itself is the enemy, is our opponent.

And there's no one who can beat it.

Not a single person, in all of history.

Everyone falls before reality.

Life is a losing battle.

"Well, if my master seeks to become the first, I shall not stand in his way."

"Nah, those are over-the-top expectations for your master…"

"Best to let it lie," Shinobu said, in a voice like ice. "Think not too deeply, nor too deeply involve thyself. 'Tis the same as for thee, or me—whatever will be, will be. In truth, it can be no other way. At the very least, 'tis not a matter for others to meddle in. In doing so,

thou and I have failed utterly and often even that former class president." Understandably, Shinobu didn't say "Sister 'Basa" this time. "Her meddling has brought nothing but pain, meow with the cat..."

"You said 'meow.'"

"Now with."

"So it was a misprint…"

If "me" could be mistaken for "n," then this book wasn't being written with a text editor or anything but with pencil and paper.

How are they ever going to make it into a digital book?

"Not to go off topic, but don't you think denshi shoseki would do better if there was a cooler-sounding, English name for them? Despite all the talk, they've plateaued."

"Well, there are already some terms…e-booku, for instance, though thou speakest not of such half-baked nonsense, but rather a well-turned phrase?"

"Yeah. We could give the characters denshi shoseki a cool phonetic reading, like they always used to do for the titles of light novels."

"Purazuma taipu."

"Awesome!"

Super sophomoric, though.

Especially the pun on "type," as in classification and typeface.

"Tekusuto."

"Concise, very sci-fi. I like it."

"Bakkuboudo."

"Emphasizing the point of view of the reader?"

“Raito noberu.”

“Yeah, just like that!”

With that perfect punch line to wrap up the day’s entertainment (?), Shinobu shrugged her shoulders and said, “Well.”

Not much of a segue…

“Here is the meat of what I wish to say to thee. I simply think thou wouldst be better served in worrying over other matters.”

“Ah.”

True, no matter how much I fretted over Hachikuji, even if it wasn’t exactly a waste of my time, it was certainly an idle use of it.

I knew that perfectly well.

I didn’t need to be told.

But other things I should be worrying about?

What things?

Nothing to worry about in my life.

Everything’s peachy.

“Hold there. Why dost thou cock thy head in confusion? Thou art a high school student, and the lot of the student is to study.”

“…”

Whaaat.

You, saying something so pedestrian?

What part of you was once a vampire?

When did you become just another nagging little sister?

Really brings me back to when Karen and Tsukihi were younger.

“I’m studying just like I should be,” I said like a peevish older brother. “You should know better than anyone, you’ve been lurking in my shadow all summer long. You know just how hard I’ve been studying for entrance exams with Hanekawa and Senjogahara. Forget Ietsugu, I can name the entire Tokugawa clan, and every damn member of the Minamoto bloodline to boot.”

“Whoa there, of course I know. And not just Japanese history, thou hast really been hustling in Japanese literature, math, English, science. Think thee I am not impressed? I have been behind thee all the way. Literally, in thy shadow. However.”

Shinobu held it a beat, then said very□to great effect, very plainly:

“Thou hast not done a single page of thy summer homework.”

004

“Who am I, Nobita?!”

I piled up all my textbooks and notebooks on the desk, and when I grasped the full extent of the summer homework I had left unfinished—or should I say pristinely untouched—I toppled backwards and lay staring at the ceiling.

Just like the hapless Nobita from Doraemon.

It was August twentieth.

The last day of summer break.

The new term started tomorrow, a wonderful, ideal situation.

It was so perfect that it was (though I probably shouldn’t say this) amusing—someone who actually slips on a banana peel must feel the same way.

Nothing like the classics.

At any rate.

“Help me, Nobuemon!”

“What an ever-so-plausible name.”

Nobuemon—that is, Shinobu—was smirking down at me, that familiar too-wicked glint in her eye.

Doraemon never loooked so heinous.

“But does not ‘Doraemon’ put thee in mind of that bloated sumo wrestler ‘Dozaemon’? Both are bluish and round… Hmm, mayhap Mr. Fujiko even based the one upon the other.”

“No way a nationally beloved character was modeled on a guy who looked like a drowned corpse.”

“Nay, but when ye truly consider it, does not the famous tale of Doraemon’s creation ring somehow false?”

“The story is famous all right, and it is a little too perfect, but why do you know about that?”

It was a little lowbrow for her.

When was she reading manga, anyway?

“It doesn’t come up as much as it used to,” I said, “but there was a time when the accepted wisdom was that reading too much manga turned you into an idiot. Always seemed like a foolish prejudice to me, but I can’t altogether refute that theory in your case.”

“Whaaat.”

“Weren’t you a little smarter back around spring break?”

“Whaaat.”

Seriously.

You don’t seem pleased to hear it, but during spring break, I’m pretty sure you weren’t the kind of character who went, Whaaat.

I’m pretty sure something has changed.

“And yet the idiot is thee, my master.” Saying thee, my master and calling me an idiot in the same breath□she had a fast and loose way with words. “Thou wert screaming, ‘Who am I, Nobita?’ But gone are such characters who would leave this much summer homework undone. Nothing like the classics, ’tis true, but this is a little too classic.”

“Well, it happened on HeartCatch PreCure! just the other day.”

“Thou art in this predicament precisely because thou dost watch PreCure as a high school student.”

“Oh yeah? If you’ve got a problem with PreCure, let’s hear it.”

“Thou shalt hear it all right, but my problem is with thee.”

Harsh.

But HeartCatch PreCure! is actually really good.

There’s no question that the current series couldn’t exist without the original, but not to put too fine a point on it, I’d call it the best PreCure of all time.

I even get up early to watch the show.

Sunday is the only day I’m grateful to my little sisters.

Even though I also tape it.

“A fine student, indeed.”

“It’s important to take a breather sometimes.”

“Is it not an insult to the creators to watch a program or read a book with such a cockamamie motivation as a breather?”

“We’re not talking about some ramen shop stickler here. No creator would say something so fussy.”

Be nice if there weren’t.

The kind who’d say, Sit up straight while you’re watching this.

“My master, assertions like ‘late-night radio is the friend of exam prep’ have been going unchallenged, but when ye think how seriously the hosts take their work, how canst ye study whilst listening? Listen to music on an iPod while ye work, and the musicians will slaughter thee. Their ire shall be roused: Background music? What’s so ‘back’ about it? When did we become your backing band?!”

“It’s not that I don’t understand where you’re coming from, but I hate thinking about such a savage world.” Or perhaps it meant that

all jobs are service-industry jobs. “Putting aside my motivation, though, I definitely should have noticed while I was watching PreCure…that I’d left so much of my summer homework undone. Shit, at this rate Cobraja is coming to town.”

I foolishly thought that since I was thoroughly wrapped up in studying for entrance exams every day, I wasn’t slacking off… Somehow, I had managed to neglect the most fundamental of fundamentals.

“Taking lines from anime so seriously… And thou still fancy thyself a student? Think well, is this even the year that HeartCatch PreCure! is being broadcast?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

If you start to look, there are already contradictions all over the place.

Flagrant ones.

“It’s really tough on Kanbaru, because they keep revising the rules for basketball. I let something like ‘What’s with this quarter system?’ slip recently, and Senjogahara had a big old laugh at my expense.”

“Ye might be saved such heartache if ye knew anything about the rules of basketball beyond what thou hast read in Slam Dunk,” Shinobu refused to console me. “Or can it be that Miss Serious and Miss Tsundere didn’t enlighten you in that regard?”

“I’m not sure how I feel about the sudden note of opprobrium in your new names for my friends, but those two…”

I finally got myself up off the floor as I said this.

I could go on pretending to throw little hissy fits all I wanted, but it was time to face up to reality.

To contend with reality.

I was eighteen now.

An adult.

Adults don't throw hissy fits.

"Those two are the type," I said, "to finish their summer homework before summer break has even begun."

"I am not sure how I feel about that," sighed Shinobu.

I'm not too sure how I feel about you, Shinobu.

You're getting a little too human.

I continued, "So they must've assumed I'd finished my homework before the beginning of summer break too…"

"Hmm. All right, I have a foolproof plan for thee."

"Hmm?"

"Hahahah. Didst think I would let thy predicament pass in silence?"

Shinobu□who right up to the very last second knew my homework was sitting piled up and not said anything□who must've left it to the last second by design, probably taking delight in her premeditated crime□haughtily puffed out her chest.

Her flat chest only looked flatter when she did that.

"I shall reveal all, once I have feasted on Mister Donut."

"How long has that been your agenda?"

She drove a hard bargain.

But I had no other recourse.

"Done. It's settled, so tell me."

"If thou canst but copy the work of Miss Serious or Miss Tsundere, all shall be well."

"…"

Her “foolproof plan” was so shallow you could collect clams in it.

The water wasn’t even up to my ankles.

“How now, what is it with that face? Didst thou not say that those two finished their homework long ago?”

“I did, but.”

“Then thou shouldst wield the pure goodwill of those two girls, besotted with you as they are, to thine advantage, and make thy request.”

“What an awful way to put it!”

What kind of inhuman bastard was I supposed to be?

Unthinkable.

“I mean, I reject your proposal.”

“For what reason?”

“Because those two would never let me copy off of them in a million years.”

It goes without saying that Hanekawa is far too serious-minded for that; if I asked her she’d just scold, “Do your own work.” Senjogahara might let me copy off her if I asked, but now that she had turned over a new leaf, I didn’t want to be providing any weird stimuli.

I didn’t know what might trigger a return to her old self.

“I don’t want to have to tell her, ‘Hey, you seem almost like your old self again.’”

“If thou wouldst fain not speak such a hackneyed line, then simply check thyself.”

Shinobu, who just didn’t seem to get Hanekawa or Senjogahara’s scariness, wasn’t really taking my meaning, but despite her

incomprehension, she also seemed to understand.

“Well then,” she suggested, “why not copy from another friend?”

“…”

What a horrible thing to say.

I didn’t recall raising her to be such a cruel child.

“Do you really believe in other friends? How old are you?”

“Five hundred,” Shinobu replied.

Thou speakest about other friends as though they were Santa Claus, she observed.

Santa Claus is based on the Christian Saint Nicholas, so just by uttering that name she was liable to suffer purification, but she had a real laissez-faire attitude about such rules.

“Yeah? But now that you mention it, you’re always saying you’re 500 years old, but are you exactly 500? Not likely.”

“At my age, such fine distinctions lose their meaning. I am 500, loosely speaking.”

“Sure. So precisely how old are you?”

“I am 598 years and eleven months old to be precise.”

“You’ve really been cooking the books!”

You’re 600, loosely speaking!

Don’t try to shave off a hundred years!

That’s no joke!

“If you’re that old, you must know all this stuff. Why don’t you just do my homework for me? Not even all of it, just some. If you do, we’ll go to Mister Donut, and while I can’t promise a feast, if we go when there’s a sale on, I can dish you out a bit of a treat.”

“Alas, Japan’s standardized system of learning is not compatible with my intellectual acumen.”

“You stuck-up…”

Stuck up in the stratosphere.

I really couldn’t tell if her personality was flowering or souring.

“Then,” I demanded to know, “what kind of system of learning is it compatible with?”

“Wrap a green onion around your neck to cure a cold.”

Oh, so an old wives’ tale system?

It wasn’t a comeback I could actually use on Shinobu, who hated being thought of as a crusty senior citizen just as much as being categorized as a nonexistent youth.

A former aristocrat, she sure was proud.

An upper-crusty senior citizen.

“What manner of insolent thoughts are running through thy head?”

“None, ma’am.”

“Anyway, I shall not help thee with thy homework,” Shinobu said.

High-and-mightily.

Stop acting high and mighty.

“What have you been doing for the last 600 years? Haven’t you learned anything at all?”

“Life is itself a lesson.”

“You’re undead.”

Humans can’t live for 600 years.

“Well, I did not mean to offend. Thou dost know other friends. What about Miss Bangs or Monkey Girl?”

“No way, Sengoku, she’s a disaster. That’s totally off the table.”

I’d had plenty of chances to hang out with her over summer break, and we’d even talked about it. At the time, I thought I was on top of things (delusion), so like a snob I asked her, Sengoku, are you doing your homework like you ought to?

“Oh-ho. And her response?”

“Huh? We’ve finally got a nice summer break, Big Brother Koyomi, why ruin it with something terrible like homework?”

“…”

“Yup. Seems like she intended to skip it all along.”

“Big-shot, eh?”

“She said, A scolding after summer break would be the end of it.”

“The lass ought to get scolded, yet dares speak as if she were preparing to stand by someone else?”

“You should only study when you feel like it.”

“To spout such self-indulgent nonsense as though she were dispensing humane advice…”

Thine imitation was surprisingly accurate, added Shinobu. Disagreeably so.

An unexpected repercussion.

“I’ve only realized it recently, but,” I noted, “just because Sengoku is quiet and meek doesn’t mean that she’s diligent or clever, or that she’s a good kid.”

“Hmmm.”

“Her notebooks are laughable. Seems like she used to do

calligraphy, so her writing is super neat, like Tomehane!-level. But every single answer is wrong."

"Laughable indeed."

"Though we shouldn't be laughing, and it's sort of biased to think that people with neat handwriting have to be smart."

Incidentally, Hanekawa's handwriting is superb.

Even though she doesn't do calligraphy.

I teased her that she was like some font software.

Incidentally again, Senjogahara's handwriting is pretty bad.

Which I find endearing.

"And Monkey Girl?"

"Kanbaru is actually diligent, so I'm sure she's done her homework, but she's in a different year."

"I see. So even if Miss Bangs had completed her assignments, it would have done naught for thee."

For 500-, or rather coming up on 600-year-old Shinobu, a few years, the difference between middle and high school, actually hadn't registered.

How broad-minded.

"Let me see, thine other friends□"

"Don't count them. I don't want to contend with such a harsh reality."

"One, two, three."

"Don't use your fingers. It'll only take one hand."

"Ah, I have it. Thy sisters can lend thee a hand."

“They’re still in middle school too.”

“But thou surely hast homework with which a middle schooler might aid thee? Like thy picture diary.”

“I wasn’t assigned a picture diary!”

Hmm, but Shinobu had a point.

In terms of whether or not it was a possibility, it was.

Forget about Karen, but Tsukihi might help if I played my cards right. She was precocious and could probably handle some of it quite well.

“But wait. My pride as an older brother won’t let me ask my little sister.”

“If thou art looking to a little girl like me for ideas, thou art well past the point of pride.”

“Save me, Shinobushi Denka!”

“Such forced wordplay is fruitless, for the reference is obscured.”

Guess I ran out of juice.

Obviously, it was a play on Umeboshi Denka.

“His Highness Pickled Plum,” Shinobu muttered. “Only a true Fujiko fan could abide the sensibility. ‘Pickled Plum’…”

“You keep being suspiciously hard on Fujiko-sensei.”

“Stuff and nonsense. I am a true fan.”

“You may well be a true fan, but if you are, then true fans are kinda unpleasant.”

“Even Fujiko-sensei nods from time to time.”

“Take that solicitude and shove it!”

Enough.

Let's turn our attention back to the mountain of homework atop my desk.

Of course, my academic ability had shown improvement (thanks to excellent tutoring) in its own way—not to toot my own horn, but I'd say by leaps and bounds (don't toot your own horn). It wasn't as if I couldn't handle what you might call the softball assignments they'd thrown at us for summer break.

If I only had the time, it wouldn't even be a thing—if I only had the time.

I didn't have the time.

Sunday, August twentieth.

Checking the clock, I saw that it was already 10 p.m. after chatting it up with Shinobu.

Only two hours remaining of summer break.

Where did I go wrong?

Was it bringing Hachikuji over to hang out?

Was it my ice cream date with Ononoki?

Or was it this conversation with Shinobu?

Or maybe I should stop worrying about today and rewind a little further. My clash with Kaiki and my battle with Kagenui probably didn't help, either.

Looking at it that way, it wasn't just my summer homework. While the lot of the student is to study, I seemed to be perpetually avoiding it.

Or maybe the story, itself, is avoiding a lot.

Maybe it's all been just idle chatter.

Maybe what you've read between the lines, beneath the surface, has been insufferable.

"Ahhh," I lamented, "I wish that clock would just break down right now and start going backwards."

"Forward it goes."

"If I put the batteries in backwards, do you think it'll run backwards?"

"What can they be teaching thee in science class?"

The clock on the wall was digital anyway.

It would enter occult territory for it to run backwards.

"In thine eighteen years of life, for ye need not six hundred, hast thou not learned at least that much?"

"But if I smash that liquid crystal panel part, don't you think p.m. might become a.m.?"

"If that shall solve anything, then by all means."

"Shit, if only I'd noticed yesterday…even this morning. With two hours left, there's nothing I can do."

"Hahaha. While 'tis a shame not to feast on Mister Donut, I feel sated by the sight of thy miserable countenance."

"What a sadistic little girl…"

No, but really, what was I going to do?

In Koyomi Araragi's case, unlike for Sengoku, a scolding wouldn't be the end of it.

Due to my devotion to wickedness during my first two years of high school (You couldn't really call it devotion or wickedness. Hanekawa's willful misapprehension aside, I just used to cut class all the time. My conscience is clear), my reputation in the teachers'

camp couldn't be worse.

Even Hanekawa and Senjogahara's "image change" was laid at my door (though that I can't really refute); in other words, failing to do my homework could bring about a marked drop in faith in me within the staff room and seriously impede my school life thereafter.

A scolding would be the end of me.

Seriously, my prospects for graduation would be in jeopardy.

It would be a hell of a punch line to my exam prep if I got into the college of my choice but didn't make it to graduation.

"I'd have to live the double life of a college student and high school student!"

"No, thou wouldst simply be denied entrance to the university."

"Nobuemon, get out your time machine. I've got to pop back to yesterday."

"Play with words like Mr. Fujiko to thy heart's content, but listen thou, leave off shortening it to Nobu," Shinobu said as though she really hated it.

She never took to the helmet and goggles Oshino had given her, but she didn't seem to mind the name Shinobu Oshino.

"All right then, Shinobu. Get out your time machine."

"Like I can," said the vampire, before suddenly glancing out the window. "But if thou wouldst fain travel in time, I shall not withhold my cooperation."

"Huh?"

"Thou wouldst return to yesterday, correct?"

And she returned her gaze to me.

Laughing her gruesome laugh, as always.

Extraordinarily carefree, as though it were all a game, she invited:

“Let’s!”

005

Two hours later—that is, around midnight on the morning of August twenty-first, precisely as summer break ended—Shinobu and I found ourselves on the grounds of the Kita-Shirahebi Shrine. This was where Kanbaru and I had come a while back to place a mysterious talisman at Oshino's request—and where I had been reunited with Nadeko Sengoku after all those years—a place Oshino likened to an air pocket within the town.

A hangout for aberrations.

Hadn't he also called it something like that?

The truth is that even now I don't really understand, but that's just it—the only thing that was clear, painfully so, was that the place was poorly understood.

"Precisely by virtue of which 'tis the appropriate place—ultimately, any would serve, but I thought perhaps a locale with which thou art acquainted would suit thee best."

"Hmm. While I'm certainly acquainted with it, honestly, I don't have good memories of this shrine…"

I'd had a terrible experience.

Terrible things had happened.

With Kanbaru, with Sengoku—and.

"If only," I said, "it were a childhood acquaintance."

"Wherefore?"

"When you're at my level, just saying 'childhood acquaintance' makes the heart go pitter pat."

“A life lived in vain.”

“How dare you!”

“The term is also used for the same sex, is it not?”

“Same sex? What would be the point? He comes to wake you up in the morning?”

“True, come as they may…”

“Something wrong with the ruins of that old cram school?”

“Aye, that place remains somewhat spiritually disordered thanks to that rampaging onmyoji Yozuru Kagenui. I might fail and time warp us five hundred million years into the past.”

“We’d die.” Five hundred million years? Whatever epoch that was, it definitely wasn’t hospitable to our survival. “To begin with, is it really so easy to time warp? So far I’ve gone along with what you’ve been saying, but doesn’t that only exist in science fiction? I just can’t get on board.”

“Art thou a moron?” Shinobu looked truly appalled as she said this. “If aberrations may exist, why not time travel?”

“…”

Why not, indeed.

“There are even time-traveling aberrations,” she said. “Let me see, the one with a name like…Gashadokuro.”

“That could only be Gashadokuro.”

And I don’t think Gashadokuro even can.

It’s not such a timely yokai.

You can tell just by looking at it.

It’s just a skeleton.

“Even supposing Gashadokuro could do it, I’m pretty sure a vampire can’t. I’ve never heard of it, anyway.”

“’Tis true, a vampire cannot. But I have been dubbed the king of aberrations, the aberration-slaying aberration. Nothing lies beyond my powers.”

“Are you sure? Sounds kinda fishy to me.”

“Oh? We do not have to do this. I do not wish to do this. Thy tearful request to return to yesterday hath moved me to assay it, more out of curiosity than anything.”

“…”

Well, I wasn’t that serious about returning to yesterday.

Would I have liked to? Sure, definitely, but it wasn’t like I’d brought it up because I thought it was actually possible. Tearful, I was not. I mean, a time warp… Wasn’t Shinobu just bluffing?

Having blurted it out, she just couldn’t go back on it now, right?

Who was being tearful here?

Fairly sure all along that she was hoping to fool me in the end with some kind of illusion, I hadn’t said anything until now, and yet…for her part, not looking remotely embarrassed, Shinobu was methodically going ahead with her preparations.

Amid the darkness, she seemed to be examining the area around the torii gate.

And “examining” was the word; she wasn’t putting up talismans or hanging ropes or anything, just feeling around like a famed detective might at a crime scene in a classic mystery novel□but I had to admit, the vibes she gave off were somehow imposing.

Even as I thought, You liar□I did consider it for a moment, that one-in-a-million chance.

But traveling in time seemed to be on a completely different level

from flying or running at incredible speeds or packing an earth-shattering power punch.

“’Tis the same.” As though she could read my mind—actually, since we were connected via my shadow, to some degree she indeed could—Shinobu spoke without even pausing in her inspection. “With a massive amount of energy, time travel is possible. Even thy modern science vouchsafes it, at least theoretically.”

“But isn’t that limited to traveling forward in time? I’m pretty sure returning to the past is theoretically im—”

“Are not past and future much the same?”

“…”

Ah, the words of wisdom that people who’ve lived forever spouted.

I thought it was totally hokey but found it hard to rebut her self-confident pronouncement.

“As the years pass, the distinction between yesterday and tomorrow loses all meaning.”

“That’s a relatively serious condition that afflicts people starting in their thirties.”

“All right.” Shinobu glanced back at me. “This torii will do.”

Whether or not it would, she didn’t seem to have tricked it up in any way—it was still nothing but a decaying old torii.

Even in my mostly human state, the rickety gate looked as though I could knock it down with one kick—is a way of speaking that might invite divine retribution.

But it didn’t feel like there even was a god there to hand it down. At least, if I were a god, I’d scamper away from such a me-forsaken shrine at the earliest opportunity.

“Thou art yet distanced somewhat from humanity, imagining thyself as a god.”

“Listen, maybe it’s inevitable to some degree, Shinobu, but stop reading my mind whenever you feel like it. What if a dirty thought pops into my head?”

“Let not any dirty thoughts pop into thy head.”

“Ahh, that won’t work. If you tell me not to, I’m just going to have more of them. My imagination spreads its wings when your collarbone peeks through the open shoulder of your dress.”

“That much, at least, remains within tolerable bounds.”

“…”

Was there any demand for little girls who were fine with smut?

Even if there was, well, better not to supply.

“It sounds indecent only because thou sayest ‘little.’ Little blond girl, little blond girl, the ring of it is overly precious. In the past, thou didst simply call me a blond girl.”

“Yeah. But the word ‘girl’ is too general, things got confusing.”

The fact is that I started using different terms so I could differentiate between Shinobu and Hachikuji.

There’s a behind-the-scenes peek for you.

Incidentally, in that schema, Ononoki is the young girl.

“So,” I said, “this tori□”

“O ruddy darkness, which ruleth over chaos! I beckon thee, orb that maketh sport with the ebb and flow of time! Repeat but the final light that in turning turns, and pour forth thy thunder to fill the heavens! Walkers in blackness, swimmers in ash! With the sin-drenched and unspeakable name, make thyselves to convey us hence!”

“You start chanting an incantation?!”

I'm floored!

That is, it really brings me back!

You don't find that anymore!

That register was in vogue, what, twenty years ago?!

Shinobu kept on chanting (in Japanese, for whatever reason) what seemed like a very long incantation—and somewhere, some unknown wheels started turning, because.

When I glanced—within.

Within the torii.

That simple tumbledown square threatening to collapse at any moment—had become a blank wall of blackness through which nothing was visible.

I drew back in horror.

My mind recoiled.

I was beside myself.

I hurried and circled round the torii to look through from the other side, but everything looked normal, so very normal—the grounds, the path up to the main shrine, and the building itself all peered back at me.

Continuing my circuit of the torii, I stepped back onto the precincts—and once again, I could no longer see the steps on the other side. There was only darkness—

"No, not quite darkness… It really is like a wall, or…what? A portal to another dimension or something."

"And so it is," Shinobu said lightly. An affirmation so unhesitating that it seemed impossible for it to be a lie. "It appears to have gone well, for a first attempt. Still got it, even if the greater part of my power hath been lost since I became a little girl."

Had there been a multitude of clocks floating around like in a Dalí painting instead of just a black wall, 'twould have been perfect, she coolly tossed off.

"Still got it," she says…

Not that she was wrong.

"Well, actually, if you're able to summon up other dimensions, can you even say you've lost your power?"

That was comfortably in the cosmic-scale, solar-class range.

I seem to remember Hanekawa saying that even with nuclear energy, it's impossible to bend the space-time continuum□and if that's the case, then just how powerful was Shinobu, casually conjuring up not a time machine, but something more like Doraemon's Anywhere Door, just by chanting a single retro-sounding incantation?

Hold on just a second.

In our understanding of this world of ours, however much we may worry and lament, at the end of the day we're guaranteed a modicum of security, aren't we?

When did they revise the rules?

"'Tis not my power. Else, there would be no need for such chanting. I told thee at the outset, 'tis the power of this place. I simply converted into thermal energy what that disagreeable Aloha brat spoke of as the assembled aberrations' raw spiritual energy."

"Enough with the pseudo-science."

Spiritual energy sounds just about as fishy as true friendship, in my humble opinion.

"'Twould have made a tasty and nutritious meal. But I let it go for the sake of thy plea□nay, in exchange for thy promise of Mister Donut."

“Your personality makes any tsundere antics have the opposite effect.”

Leaves a bad taste in the mouth.

“Yet we must make haste,” urged Shinobu. “I doubt I can open such a gate a second time. If we dally but another minute, forsooth it shall close forever.”

“Forsooth…”

The language of the elderly can be a bit obscure.

Or rather, I doubted people 500 or 600 years ago actually talked like that.

If you traced it back, it was probably just some local dialect.

That aside, the word “gate” gets a perfect score on the shadiness test. It doesn’t sound even the slightest bit credible. I’d be more likely to travel through time if I jumped into the drawer of my desk.

“Still, one minute? Hang on, I’m not prepared for this, mentally speaking.”

“Ye need no preparation. Ye need but to jump.”

“Huh? That’s all it takes?”

“Ye need not set thyself in any way. ’Tis only time travel.”

“…”

Somehow, Shinobu’s breezy, offhanded manner was contagious.

I began to feel like a real coward for being unsure and on a different wavelength from her, like a middle schooler invited out by classmates for some late-night antics might.

Yeah, I was probably too worked up about it.

After all of the madness I’d been through in the past six months, there shouldn’t have been anything left for me to fear.

It's only time travel.

Better just go with it.

Idly popping back to yesterday and taking care of my homework lickety-split—when you think about it, that's not nearly as dangerous as being assaulted by a vampire—right?

"Okaaay, let's go!"

I triumphantly thrust my fist in the air like I had the brain of a rat.

"Onward ho!"

Shinobu was getting into the spirit of things as well. She acted nonchalant, but she did say it was her first time, and maybe she was actually pretty elated.

"Hold, there is one more thing."

"What? Don't try to stop me now that I've mustered up the foolhardiness to fling my body against this black wall."

"Thy watch."

"Huh?"

"Thy watch. The one ye affect to wear round thy right wrist even though thou art not left-handed. Give it here a moment."

"No need for the lengthy description, I know which watch you mean. Anyway, why do you want it?"

"Just give it over," Shinobu said, thrusting her hand towards me.

I didn't know what she intended, but, well, if I accepted that the gate (lol) was going to close in one minute like she warned, there wasn't any time to be explaining why.

So, just as she asked, I took off the watch that I affected to wear around my right wrist even though I'm not left-handed and placed it in the palm of her hand.

“Hmm, an antique.”

“It was a gift. Didn’t I tell you how I got it?”

“Aye, thou didst.”

Which is the whole point, added Shinobu, and no sooner than she put it in the pocket of her dress, she thrust her hand at me again.

I cocked my head in confusion, whereupon Shinobu prompted: “Why dost thou hesitate?” Extending her arm a little further, she took my hand in hers and entwined her fingers in mine as lovers do.

“Oh? Ohh? Ohhh?”

“No need to be so flustered. If ye get all worked up, it will be transmitted to me and I too shall become embarrassed. We go to the toilet together, bathe together, live together round the clock.”

“But holding hands with someone of the opposite sex will always make a sober gentleman like me get all flustered□”

“Silence. Come, and let us leap in straightaway. My sense of time is poor, so I must needs rely upon thy skill at cornering.”

“Oh, I see.”

So that was it. She couldn’t do it on her own.

I was wondering why she hadn’t made use of time travel in any number of situations before now if it was so easy for her, but if she needed a partner, then it all made sense.

All right then, come with me, Shinobu!

To an unknown world!

Although the one we were jumping into was more known than unknown, being the past and all, that was how I psyched myself up as I stepped into the black wall within the torii.

Without an inkling of what it meant.

006

I have to confess, when I actually stepped into that black wall—when I actually enacted that delusional nonsense about time travel, I only half believed in the daydream that I was enacting.

What am I saying? I didn't believe in it at all.

Not even a tiny bit.

I'm truly sorry if that ruins the mood.

But it's not like my disbelief was groundless. Nothing worth spinning into a tale, but Shinobu had spouted reckless claims any number of times, and knowing them to be reckless, I'd gone along half in fun, in what you might call the spirit of play.

Like, I created perpetual motion.

Or, I violated the Theory of Relativity.

Or, Let's go through the looking-glass.

That kind of play, make-believe.

So I can't deny that I downplayed this little adventure as another one of those. The unvarnished truth is that I underestimated Shinobu.

They say you can get used to anything.

But nothing is as dangerous as getting used to something.

Shinobu Oshino. I should've kept it in mind, but I completely forgot—that she was an aberration and the aberration slayer, a vampire, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

Even if she'd lost her power.

Even if she'd assumed the form of a little girl.

I should have remembered what she was.

In other words, wanting to run away from the reality that summer break was already over and I had yet to touch my homework, I'd accepted Shinobu's proposal much as I might feel, in the face of impending exams, the urge to clean my room or take a trip—my mental state was already in the neighborhood of damn-the-torpedoes.

You could just call it desperation.

You could even say I'd given in to despair.

So.

So I didn't for a second trust in some overblown occult nonsense like time travel.

While I was passing under that torii, rather than believing something as convenient as "returning to yesterday," I was thinking once more about—Shinobu would likely tell me again that I was stuck in perpetual puberty—Hachikuji.

Today—yesterday now?—she'd made an exception and left "the streets" to come hang out in my room, but the streets were basically her home; she was always there.

And she was always the same.

Whether or not she, always the same, was happy—I have no idea.

What did happiness mean for her?

What was a "good thing" for her?

I had absolutely no idea.

I also had no idea what her hopes and dreams were—in fact, few

people speak as little about their true feelings as she does.

Few aberrations.

She'd been telling nothing but lies from the start—she hadn't told me a thing about herself.

She kept it all inside.

Shut away inside her shell.

Like—a snail.

…But who am I to talk.

I'd been the same way.

Before Hanekawa helped me see the light over spring break, I'd been shut away in my shell—I can't even imagine what kind of person I would be, what my personality would be like now, if I hadn't met her.

I don't even want to try and imagine.

Of course, I wasn't contemplating anything so outrageous as becoming to Hachikuji what Hanekawa was to me—I'd never be so presumptuous.

That would be the height of conceit.

However—I couldn't keep myself from wondering if there wasn't something I could do for her.

It had been three months since May.

When I thought about the solace I found in that adorable young lady—I just wanted to reciprocate a little bit.

Now that—is an unwanted favor.

Maybe I was being presumptuous.

But.

“Oi, rouse thyself! Ye must not faint at such a trifling shock.”

“…”

My body was being shaken—and I opened my eyes.

I came to.

“…Ah,” I said, “so it was all a dream.”

“Nope.”

Shinobu kicked me.

She was a harsh little girl when it came to half-hearted jokes.

She didn’t spare the rod.

“What the hell?” I complained. “I unveil my novel, unprecedented ‘it was all a dream’ idea, and of all things, you kick me in the head with your mules?”

“I wish I was wearing heels. Thou canst not tout such a famous ending as thine own creation.”

“Mm… Hang on.”

I was staring up at the sky—it seemed as though I had toppled over and was lying face up.

The sky was pure blue—in other words, like it was daytime.

Daytime?

Did you say daytime?

“Um… What time is it?”

“’Tis twelve. Noon,” Shinobu answered while looking at my watch, which she was wearing now, since I didn’t know when. It was wrapped firmly around her right wrist—was she making fun of me, or something? “There seems to be a certain amount of deviation in time travel, after all. Perhaps ’tis impossible to go back precisely

twenty-four hours.”

“…”

When I surveyed my surroundings—well, at that moment, laid out upside down on my back like I’d been stranded in the mountains, I was in no position to survey my surroundings. Odd. I was sure I’d been on the grounds of the Kita-Shirahebi Shrine…

Why did it feel like I was lying on stairs?

“Leaping through the torii with such vigor, ’twas inevitable that ye should tumble down the steps. Kakak, I thought maybe we had switched bodies.”

“When did you even watch that movie?”

The scene was more famous than famous, so I knew it, but I hadn’t actually experienced the film myself.

Did Oshino tell her about it?

No way they had a Blu-ray player in those ruins…

But she was right.

I’d dashed with considerable vigor to leap through the black wall, and I guess that amounted to hurling my body down some stairs.

Suicidal!

“To attempt the triple jump on such steep steps… I was surprised, I admit. I must inform thee, however, that I am a victim also. I went rolling down along with thee.”

Look, Shinobu said, pulling up the hem of her dress.

Her kneecaps were scraped.

Yikes, they’d scabbed over…

“That looks painful… If it was my fault, then frankly I have no choice but to apologize.”

“’Tis nothing for which ye need apologize.”

What a lenient little girl.

Though she could stop hiking up her dress already.

“But can’t you heal up a little wound like that in no time?” I asked. “Even if you’ve lost your power, you’re still an aberration.”

“I can heal it if I so choose, but I figured it might make for a good fetish.”

“It’s your pitch?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“If that’s what you were thinking, then there was no point in apologizing.”

“Which is why I told thee ’twas nothing for which ye need apologize.”

With that, Shinobu let down the hem of her dress.

This hid her kneecaps—and now that they were hidden, I realized how much I’d enjoyed them.

Geez, finding a little girl’s scabs so endearing felt wrong, inhuman.

When I looked myself over, I was scraped up a bit as well—my vampire nature was weak at present (it has its own biorhythm), so it wouldn’t heal quickly.

Well, normally, that’s how things went. It hurt and everything, but I could take it.

“Where are we…part way up the mountain?” The steps were like a vague game trail, with no landings (it might be more accurate to call it a bumpy ascending path), so it wasn’t immediately clear, but that seemed to be more or less the case. I’d really made a go of tumbling my way down. “Did we really succeed at traveling through time? Here in the middle of the mountains, it’s impossible

to tell if there's been any change." The scenery wouldn't be all that different between yesterday and today—or to be honest, it appeared completely identical.

"Naturally we succeeded." My doubts drew a disdainful scowl from Shinobu. "Since the day of my birth, never have I met failure."

"You're one hell of a braggart."

Where on earth did she get that kind of confidence?

It's because you've failed over and over again that you're in your current state—I mean, you're sealed in the shadow of a completely average high school student in a remote eastern island nation. That, all by itself, seems like a massive, irredeemable failure for a legendary vampire.

"Nay, it is absolutely impossible that I have failed. I guarantee it."

"She guarantees it…"

"If indeed I have, then I shall have no qualms about letting thee call me Shinobu the Blunderer from now on."

"Don't go making any rash promises…" You'd think someone who's been alive so long would be mindful of the consequences of her actions. Or maybe if you've been alive so long, you weren't? "Anyway…I wonder. Now that you mention it, I feel like yesterday—or I guess now the day before yesterday?—the day before yesterday, August nineteenth, the weather was clear like it is now… Are you sure I wasn't just unconscious for twelve hours because I fell down the stairs?"

In that case, I was in real trouble. It meant not only having skipped my homework, but totally blowing off the opening ceremony for the new term.

Hanekawa would kill me…

Tremble.

"I am at a loss. Why art thou so hesitant to trust me?"

“Yeah, I wonder.”

“Verily, I have done things to thee, but never yet have I hurt thee by design. When I have done evil, it was ever with thy good in mind.”

“Let’s start with the ‘done evil’ part.”

“Rather, why dost thou speak to me as though we are equals? I am thine elder, and thou shouldst speak to me respectfully. Respectfully, I say.”

“Now you’re saying this?”

Granted, you’re 600 and I’m eighteen.

But what a time to teach me to respect my elders…

“Under the circumstances, ’tis already deplorable that thou art disposed to doubt me from the start. Before considering whether I have succeeded or failed, first thou shouldst give proper thanks for my good intentions.”

“Huh…”

“‘Thank you very much, Ms. Shinobu.’ Go on, try it.”

“Your character has been all over the place right from the beginning of the series…”

I don’t think it’s as simple as just saying that she’s an aberration who’s easily influenced by others or by her environment… Hachikuji is an aberration too, and she maintains her character unswervingly.

Why the difference?

“The difference is whether or not the aberration in question is paired with thee.”

“Don’t act like it’s my fault.”

“But it is emphatically thy fault.”

“No, no, no. Even if it is, I’m telling you not to act like it is.”

“What a way to avoid responsibility.”

Such lily-livered diplomacy, denounced Shinobu.

What a horrible thing to say.

Didn’t she learn when she was little that some things are better left unspoken?

“But you’re absolutely right. I can at least trust that you did this with the best intentions.”

The truth is, there’s nothing in this world as precarious as a deed carried out with the best intentions, and no words so overbearing as I did it for your sake, but there was no time to waste on such childish arguments at the moment.

Senjogahara told me that whether or not you can abide overbearing good will is a mark of adulthood—and if Senjogahara can say that, then she’s growing up.

As her boyfriend, nothing could be more pleasing.

So I was going to do some growing up, too.

Even though I didn’t feel grateful for anything, I’d thank Shinobu.

“Thank you very much, Ms. Shinobu.”

“Thy smile is most suspect…”

True.

I didn’t need a mirror to know that it couldn’t be more saccharine.

“So what? Saccharine is sweet, and you love sweets!” I retorted. “Who doesn’t love a sweet smile? Love, sweet, smile—not a suspect word among them.”

“The more thou carryest on, the more thy words smack of deceit. Love, sweet, smile, one is enough.”

“If I have to pick one, then…love.”

I hugged Shinobu.

Ardently.

No holding back.

“Hahahah,” she laughed merrily. “You adorable little thing. Oui oui. All right, I’ll let thee off the hook, and forgive thee for thy previous insolent speech.”

She didn’t mind it.

Moreover, she forgave me.

She was a little too lenient.

“C’mon, you’ve got to fight back, like Hachikuji. If you don’t stop me, I won’t stop, will I? If you don’t protect your chastity, who will?”

“Never have I protected my chastity.”

“…”

She really came from a different age.

I just couldn’t get down with her ethics and mores.

Oshino, if you have the time to instill her with aberration lore (or to show her I Are You, You Am Me for that matter), how ’bout starting there instead.

Seriously.

“I accept all comers! Such a woman am I.”

“Even without any statutes, you’re gonna be censored.”

But then again, when Shinobu was Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, she only ever created one thrall besides myself, so I guess her conduct was pretty upright after all.

In which case, was she just trying to play the fool with pronouncements like that? Or was it like middle-school posing?

“Come then! Embrace me at any time, just as ye please!”

“No way, if I did, you might suck my blood at any moment.”

Moving away from Shinobu, I finally got off my knees and glanced up the stairs, that is, in the direction of the torii.

I realized again just how far I had fallen…

It wouldn’t have been surprising if I’d died.

It would likely be written off as a typical mountain climbing accident, but on one of the piddling hills in our town? How embarrassing for the bereaved family.

“Hey, Shinobu.”

“What is it?”

“Can we also get back through that torii?”

“Mm? Aye. Well, something like that.”

“Why so vague?!”

“Well, now that ye ask, I had not considered the return journey…”

Was Shinobu’s terrifying response.

Just a minute.

Come to think of it, Shinobu didn’t use her own power to pry open the time warp gate or whatever (feels like the fishy words just keep on coming, but I’m not going to worry about it anymore); she said she exploited the power of the location, of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, a hangout for aberrations…

“If you already consumed that power, then I suppose you won’t be able to reopen that gate or whatever it is.”

“Hah,” Shinobu snorted at my concern. That was heartening, even if it was also unpleasant. “Now let me see…” she trailed off.

Totally undependable.

She’d just put on airs by reflex.

“Hey, wait a second, Shinobu… Don’t tell me we’re stuck in yesterday’s world and can’t get home to our own.”

“No, ’tis fine, ’tis fine. Have no fear, my master.” It sure sounded like she was bluffing, but she took my arm with total self-assurance. “Consider for a moment. This is yesterday, is it not? From this perspective, ’tis on the morrow that I shall open a time tunnel using the aberrational essences gathered at the shrine. Therefore, at present that spiritual energy hath yet to be exploited, and I may open such a gate.”

“I don’t even want to give a rejoinder to a word like ‘time tunnel,’ I’ll just pass that one on to the reader.”

I delegate the responsibility entirely to you.

The narrator has left the building.

“But wait, doesn’t that create a time paradox? If we use up all that energy now, then our tomorrow selves won’t be able to come back to today.”

“…”

Ah.

She falls silent.

She goes and falls silent.

“Hmm, well, indeed,” Shinobu muttered, and since there was nothing I could do but watch and wait, I went quiet too, for about

five minutes, until she finally began to explain her take on the situation. “Aye, I recall now. ’Tis easier to return to the future than to return to the past, for it doth not require the extra energy necessary to go against the flow of time. In principle ’tis as with salmon. Therefore, we need not consume so much energy for the return journey, and plenty shall remain for our use on the morrow.”

“Hmph… Well, that’s a tenuous explanation, but if you say so.”

No point in arguing.

It was good enough for the moment.

But it already crossed my mind.

The somewhat risky possibility of a time paradox.

“Thyme pair o’ docks? Thou hast said it before, but I knew not of what ye spoke.”

“No, no, no. Forget about ‘paradox’ for a second, why are you spelling ‘time’ that way?”

What an airhead.

Didn’t she just use the term “time tunnel”?

“Ho ho. Yet I was certain thou wert speaking of the herb.”

“No, you weren’t. The other word is incomparably more common.”

“Well, aren’t we particular. Ha!” Shinobu virtually spat out that last syllable, her sadistic look enough to make any enthusiast drool. “All right, thyme out, thyme out. Let me think.”

“No, no more thinking.” It was exhausting responding to all her little jokes, so I decided to just explain it to her. “A time paradox is a contradiction that ensues from time travel.”

“What’s a contradiction?”

“Come on, words more difficult than ‘contradiction’ have definitely

come up in our conversations.”

“I simply let pass the non-standard vocabulary that ye sometimes employ.”

“Okay, okay.”

I even think you’ve used the word yourself, but if I start in on that, an actual paradox could ensue, so let me give you the standard explanation of the word.

“Long ago, in a distant land□”

“When is long ago? What distant land?”

“…”

What was she, a cheeky brat?

I had to ignore her.

Plus I had no idea.

“A merchant had for sale both a spear so powerful it could pierce any shield, and a shield so powerful it could block any spear. A passing child called out, ‘My lord merchant, what should happen were such a powerful spear to meet such a powerful shield?’”

“So the child spoke like a classic master detective?”

“‘Hey, old man. What happens if you poke that shield with that spear?’”

“Ye need not do an impression of Conan Edogawa.”

“How are you so well informed?!”

I was shocked.

I thought maybe she only watched old movies, but I had to admit, she knew her stuff.

“Look, either way, the kid says this, thrusting his finger at the

merchant: ‘If the spear penetrates the shield, then the shield is not as powerful as you claim, and if it doesn’t, then the spear is not. So, old man, what you’re saying is a logical contradiction!’”

“Is it not odd to use the very word in a story that purports to explain what it means?”

“Yep. And that, my friend, is a time paradox.”

That wrapped up surprisingly well.

I hadn’t planned it that way.

“Actually,” I continued, “I think the phenomenon of a paradox was hypothesized before the word ‘contradiction’ existed… Are you familiar with Zeno’s Paradoxes?”

“Zeno? Ne’er heard of him.”

“Well, it’s not something you absolutely have to know about or anything, but still.”

“I am familiar with Zenon’s Paradoxes.”

“…”

A really cheeky brat…

If she wasn’t a vampire, I’d smack her.

“Well, thou hast illuminated paradoxes and contradictions for me. But what is thy point?”

“Look, just think about it realistically. Let’s say I go home right now and do my homework. But if I finish all my summer homework before the end of summer break, then our motivation for time warping disappears, and I won’t time warp back to now, August nineteenth. In which case I don’t do my homework… See, isn’t that a contradiction?”

“?”

“You don’t get it!”

She’d cocked her head adorably.

It wasn’t even that complicated.

Not at all.

“Why quibble? There is nary a Doraemon episode where they fret over such things.”

“Oh, I think there is.”

“Mmmm. I may have skipped the difficult portions.”

“Sounds like you’re not a true fan after all.” Not by a long shot. As I was saying this, I glanced down towards the foot of the mountain. “So what type of time warp is this?”

“Type? What dost thou mean?”

“Well, there are two major categories. The type where the person in question is there, and the type where they aren’t.”

“What, like thine own situation in thy high-school class?”

“I’m always there!”

My presence isn’t that faint!

Gimme a break.

I’m not talking about anything so sad.

“What I’m asking is, if I go home, will ‘yesterday me’ be there, or is this me right here already ‘yesterday me’?”

“Snore.”

“Don’t fall asleep!”

“ZZZZZZZZZZ”

“Don’t fall deeper asleep!”

“Hmm. I know not,” Shinobu gave up pretending to be asleep and said this as though she were utterly fed up.

You’re so nitpicky, even though you’re a boy. You’ll never get married, her eyes insinuated.

Mind your own business.

“Thou shalt have to look and find out for thyself. Hie thee home and peer into thy room, and thy presence or absence will render the type abundantly clear.”

“I guess you’re right…”

Thinking it over was futile.

There was no guarantee that the time warp had been successful in the first place. There was still a very good possibility that I was having the world’s most ludicrous discussion with a little girl.

“Oh,” I said, “but right now, it’s noon on the nineteenth? I’m probably not home.”

“Is that so? One no longer stores such trivial memories at my age.”

“I think I remember going to the bookstore to buy some study guides.”

“’Tis simply thine imagination. Ye went to buy dirty books.”

“Not storing memories, huh?”

“Well, I do admire thee… Getting up the nerve to buy such bizarre smut at the same bookstore frequented by that ex-class president lass and Miss Bangs, as though it were nothing… I must inform thee, of course, that thou hast been spotted any number of times.”

“Maybe warn me about it when it happens!”

And don’t call it bizarre. It was pretty normal.

“Perhaps, excepting the calligraphy pens.”

“Stop it. Don’t bring up the calligraphy pens,” I cut the conversation short. This was neither the time nor the place to expose my sexual proclivities. “I see… Then maybe I’ll check the bookstore first.”

Worst-case scenario, we’d get a bit of shocking surrealist theater in which none other than myself witnesses me buying dirty books, but, well, what could you do.

“If we don’t hurry, he’ll be gone□always in a rush, that one,” I remarked as I started down the mountain.

I didn’t know exactly where on it we were, but I didn’t expect it to take too long.

Shinobu followed after me.

That is to say, she moved in sync with my shadow.

Almost as though she were on a leash, as horrible as that sounds.

“Wait, what? Shinobu, how do you know what time it is?”

“Hm?”

“I mean, that watch you’re wearing came from the future, so why would it be showing the correct time for when we are now?”

“Fear not, I adjusted it earlier. I hazarded the hour by the position of the sun. ’Twould be trouble if we knew it not, which is why I had thee remove thy watch and give it to me.”

“Huh…”

In that case, we couldn’t rely on it.

Since you messed with its crown.

“Oh, wait, I can just check the time on my cell phone.”

“Mm? Can ye? Is not the time on thy cell phone set to the future?”

“Let’s see.”

I took my phone out of my pocket.

In fact, I’d just exchanged it for a new model the other day—so Senjogahara and I could have matching ones. She also made me join some mysterious lovers’ discount service. The truth is I was a little turned off by her acting so lovey-dovey, but I was too scared to say anything.

At any rate, when I looked at the clock on the display, it read: “August 21 (Mon) 00:15 a.m.”—huh?

Wait, so if this was the time in the future—that meant only ten minutes had passed since we leapt through the torii—let’s see.

One look at the sky showed that there was no way it was currently midnight—

“Hm, if nothing else,” asserted Shinobu, “this proves the time warp was a success.”

“No, there’s still the possibility that you tampered with the clock on my phone while I was unconscious for half a day. In fact, call it a strong possibility.”

“Thou hast no trust in me at all. Why thinkest thou that I must needs pull a candid-camera stunt like that? Anyway, ’tis not so easy to tamper with the clock feature on a cell phone.”

“Maybe you used the World Clock feature to set it to Brazilian time.”

“Thy degree of doubt exceeds simply not trusting me, or deeming my words untrue or hard to believe—put simply, thou canst not stand me, can thee?”

Shinobu really did look hurt.

Who knew she could look like that.

I was kind of into it…

“Sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Oh? Truly?”

She stared up at me with tears in her eyes.

It stirred my deepest sympathies.

“Really, really. For sure.”

“Then say that thou lovest me?”

“You’re totally out of character again!”

A haughty vampire!

A potential suicide!

A taciturn girl!

Stick with any of them, even the tiniest bit!

“But must ye be so cold to me? Is it not simply my role to remain more than a friend but less than a lover?”

“I don’t mean to be cold to you, but I think you’re way off base.”

“Then what am I to thee?”

“Don’t ask such deep questions. We’ll get to that in about four more installments.”

“Oh what a time-paradoxical statement.”

“Don’t go throwing around terms you just learned. Anyway, to address that earlier doubt, clock feature aside, we should be able to connect to 1seg when we get down the mountain. Television programs and terrestrial digital broadcasting won’t be wrong about the time.”

“Thy faith in terrestrial digital broadcasting knows no bounds,” Shinobu said, wiping away her tears. “Poor subterranean analog broadcasting.”

“That sounds spooky, but there’s no such thing.”

“Whereas a celestial béchamel bread crust thing sounds delicious.”

“It does, but there’s no such thing!”

“Equestrian dental broadcasting?”

“A dentist on horseback?”

A conversation without substance.

Which took us all the way to the bottom of the mountain.

I felt like an ascetic practitioner finally returning to civilization from his mountain austerities, but there wasn’t an ounce of truth to that; all we’d done was go up and come down the shabby neighborhood hill.

Then□

Something shook me to the core.

“What?! What the hell! My granny bike is gone! It’s been stolen! Or impounded! On my honor as a bicyclist, this is a grave insult!”

“Calm thyself. Thou art overreacting. Right now ’tis yesterday, so that granny bike we rode over here with thee on the seat and me stuck in the front basket hath yet to arrive. Thou shalt not park that machine here until late tomorrow night.”

“Oh, ohh… Really?”

“Kakak, this proves that my time warp was a success. There, now how about a little apology? Come then, no need to be shy. I shall always forgive thy little follies.”

“Suuuure.”

No way.

It seemed much more likely that my bike had been stolen, or impounded…but if it had been impounded, or worse yet, stolen, it

meant that I'd lost every single one of my bicycles, so by all means I hoped that Shinobu's time warp had in fact been a success.

And so I extended the antenna of my cell phone and connected to the internet.

If a TV show□the weather report, the news□said that today was August nineteenth, I'd have no choice but to believe Shinobu.

Then I'd prostrate myself before her.

With that manly, yet somewhat servile, determination, I worked my cell phone and□huh?

Huuuuuh?

No reception?

?

"Shinobu. Did you break my cell phone while you were messing around with it?"

"Waaaaaaaahh!" li'l Shinobu wailed at the top of her lungs at long last. "I cannot bear it! I hate thee! Do what thou wilt, I care not!"

"You really sulk like a child."

"Dash!"

Shinobu made her own sound effect as she started to run off but stumbled and fell flat on her face at the edge of my shadow. In the heat of the moment, she seemed to have forgotten that she couldn't move outside its borders.

"Okay, I'm sorry, I'm really, really sorry, I didn't mean to make you cry."

Concerned about my favorability rating, I apologized sincerely to Shinobu as she lay face down on the asphalt, then put my arms around her little girl's waist to pick her up off the ground.

When she looked at me, I saw that she was crying for real.

It wasn't like with Hachikuji or Tsukihi's feigned tears—and that was actually kind of off-putting.

"Listen," I said, "it's true that the internet isn't coming through—maybe my phone broke when I fell down the stairs?"

Which really bummed me out.

After I'd gotten matching phones with Senjogahara and everything—and when I thought about how the new Senjogahara, that is to say the reformed Hitagi Senjogahara, wouldn't get mad, or fly off the handle, or lash me with her acid tongue but just be sad like a regular person, it bummed me out even more.

It pained me to be the kind of male character who made girls cry all the time.

"It still accepts inputs, though… Hm?"

What?

When I checked the screen again, it said out of range.

Still out of range, even though we'd come down off the mountain?

"Weird. I figured I'd have full bars down here."

"Do people even say 'full bars' anymore?"

"I'm sure some still do." Rebutting Shinobu's dig, I kept on working my phone…but it really did seem to be out of range, which meant that most of the functions were dead. "What's going on? Did the base station get blown up or something?"

"Thou hast a robust imagination."

"Well, seems like there's nothing for it… Let's head to the bookstore. Even without the bike, it's not so far."

"Then c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, shoulder-ride!"

“Just how far are you going to take this little girl thing?”

It made it difficult to fathom our relationship.

Kagenui laughed her ass off at me when I was giving one of my little sisters a ride on my shoulders□wait a sec, was I giving a ride or being given one that time?

It wasn’t exactly something I wanted to remember, so my memory was hazy.

But having just been cried at (or rather whined at), it was hard to refuse, so I relented (not that I even put up a fight) and let Shinobu get up onto my shoulders.

So light!

Was she completely hollow or what?

“How much do you weigh?”

“I can freely control my weight. See?”

“So heavy!”

Incredible!

Like the Crab of Weight!

No, freely controlling your weight reminded me of some other yokai… Stone-something… If you bore the burden all the way home, it would transform into treasure…

“Hm? Perhaps ’tis merely my imagination, but when I increased my weight, thy gait seemed to become somehow steadier…”

“It’s just your imagination. I’m not so greedy that the thought of treasure improves my physical conditioning.”

As we walked and talked, a gaggle of middle school girls appeared directly ahead of us. I tensed up, worrying that they might report me, but upon reflection I was just walking along with a kid on my

shoulders, so we were probably fine (if it were that time with my little sister, though, they'd definitely report us).

Then again, we must've seemed suspicious after all, because those girls were really giving me the eye

"Omigod, so cute!"

"Like a little doll!"

"Her hair's so fluffy!"

……

Shinobu was a hit.

These middle school girls weren't at all bashful, in the face of a legendary vampire.

From the dress-like uniforms, I guessed that they were students from my alma mater…in other words, Sengoku's classmates?

"Wait, this is perfect."

It struck me.

Before going to the bookstore and determining if this was a type A time warp (the person in question is there) or a type B time warp (the person in question isn't there), I could begin by verifying with these girls what I'd been unable to on my cell phone: whether the time travel had been successful in the first place.

"Hey, girls. Could you tell me if today is Monday, August twenty-first?" I just asked point-blank of none of them in particular, though it felt somewhat abrupt.

To which they answered

"What, you're waaay off!"

Though I couldn't see her, I could sense that up above me Shinobu was jubilant as if she wanted to say, Now hurry up and apologize

to me, you brat.

But hold on, I was more preoccupied with another aspect of the girl's response.

Off is one thing.

But way off?

Waaay?

"…Then what's today's date?"

I asked them.

Fearing the answer.

"What's the deal, mister, you sound like a person from the future or something." Having really hit the nail on the head, the girl replied, "It's May thirteenth."

Just like that.

Shinobu's haughty mood up above my head shifted slightly□but only slightly, as if to say: My, not at all the date I intended. Well, 'tis no big deal.

Sure, no big deal.

No way.

Having accomplished a historic feat by traveling into the past□whether this was a day or three months ago seemed to her like no big deal, no big difference.

Honestly, I'd anticipated this from the moment the girls appeared ahead of us□if it was summer break, then a gaggle of girls in their uniforms on their way home was an odd sight any way you sliced it.

So I'd surmised that we might have gone back to a time before summer break□my intuition is actually pretty good.

But that good intuition was telling me something else as well.

An alarm was going off.

And my cell phone's lack of internet access and out-of-range message uppermost in my thoughts I asked another question.

"What year is it?"

"Um "

The middle school girl informed me.

That from now, or rather from the future, we'd gone back eleven years.

007

After getting the middle schooler's name and contact info (address and telephone number), we went down into town. But we didn't have to confirm it with anyone else, or do any relevant fieldwork, or pretend we were on some cutesy program about exploring our own provincial city, to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that what the girls broke to us was true.

I've been living here for eighteen years, after all.

The scenery was naturally burned into my brain and eleven years into the past, it looked like a completely different place once we were no longer up on a mountain.

That said, it's not as though there was a specific difference I could point to.

There were, of course, concrete changes here and there: buildings unexpectedly present, or absent in other words, if pressed I'd say that everything was different, but that wasn't it. The air itself was different, that was how it felt. No point in harping on the differences. And I don't mean from an ecological standpoint, air pollution or anything, I'm talking drastically, fundamentally.

Even though it was the same townscape

The town lay before me like I had never seen it before.

It greeted us with the face of a stranger.

Greeted us as outsiders, estranged from its affairs.

Though I'd already recognized this in my heart, we visited the Araragi residence in a last vain act of hope, where verification became verity.

I never thought my house looked particularly old□but seeing it now, freshly built, I could no longer deny that it was eleven years ago.

I felt like a culprit being presented with irrefutable evidence.

Only recently, Ononoki had destroyed the front entrance with her Unlimited Rulebook, but now it lay before me looking just as it had in the good old days, before we rebuilt it, as though nothing had happened. My notion that Shinobu was lying evaporated instantly.

Although her vampiric powers included the ability to create matter, there was just no way she could create something on the scale of an entire town.

And speaking of Shinobu.

Speaking of my personal idol Miss Shinobu.

"…"

She hadn't met my eyes or spoken a single word for quite some time.

She was like her earlier characterization.

She'd reverted.

No, back then, she used to glare at me with piercing eyes, but now even that was gone, and she just averted her gaze, weakly, awkwardly. She had a "Hey, don't talk to me when I'm obviously this upset, you really ought not to take me to task" aura turned all the way up.

"…Gosh," I said.

Gazing at my own home from a distance.

In the end, the bookstore didn't even exist (it hadn't opened yet), so I still couldn't determine if this was type A or type B, but since I maintained my eighteen-year-old form even though it was eleven years ago, I guessed that it was a type A time warp where "the

person in question is there.”

Because if it was type B, it would be odd that I hadn’t turned into a charming seven-year-old boy.

Thinking about it more carefully, I probably should have figured this out when my cell phone displayed the time from “the future” (and my clothes didn’t return to yesterday’s), but it was a bit late for that now.

That is to say, if I was too brazen, I ran the risk of encountering the counterpart of “the person in question,” in other words Koyomi Araragi, the me from this point in the time stream. It was one thing if we’d gone back to yesterday, the day before, or a few months ago, but the eighteen-year-old me and the seven-year-old me might fail to identify each other even if we met.

It also meant that I didn’t need to worry about being spotted□no matter what I did at this point in the time stream, there wouldn’t be anyone to wonder, “Huh? Two Koyomi Araragis? Which one is the copy?”

So I loitered around my neighborhood.

Pretty brazenly.

Holding hands with Shinobu.

To be clear, I was holding hands with her not as a mark of deep affection, and certainly not because I was about to try time warping through a black wall again, but so that the war criminal of a little girl couldn’t run away. While it was true that she couldn’t leave the contours of my shadow, if she sunk into its depths there was no way I could pull her out again.

“Gosh, I’m sorry, Shinobu, really. For doubting you and all.”

“…”

“I was an idiot, not believing what you said. Even though I know better than anyone how amazing you are. Of course you can time warp, it would be strange if you couldn’t. Nothing is impossible for

Shinobu Oshino.”

“…”

“I mean it, your actions reflect the best vampire-kind has to offer. Not that vampires have reflections, but, you know. Wow, you really did it, eleven years in the past. The fact is, I was anxious. About whether or not I’d actually be able to finish all my summer homework if we went back only a day or two, that is. To be honest, I was terrified. Could I finish thirty days’ worth of assignments in only two, even if I pulled an all-nighter? I was worried that all of your good intentions would be for naught.”

“…”

“But that’s Shinobu for you. Didn’t even need to discuss it with this old scaredy cat, you just thought it all through for me. My anxieties were an open book to you. With eleven years, I can definitely finish. Plenty of time. I can even state with certainty that I could finish eleven years’ worth of summer homework assignments. Well, that might be going too far, actually. But thank you, Shinobu. You reaaally pulled my fat out of the fire, and I’m truly grateful. Any thanks I give will be insufficient, but let me say it just once more. Thank you so much!”

I bowed my head low.

Shinobu didn’t even look up.

“By the way□” I raised my face. Wearing a furious look, I imagine. “My little friend can take me back home, yes?”

“O-O-Of course.” It was the first time I’d heard Shinobu’s voice in quite a while, and it was clearly trembling. “’Tis all going according to plan. I thought it might take thee eleven years to complete thy homework, so I took it upon myself to be considerate.”

“Eleven years? Am I that much of a slacker?”

I was too tired even to look furious anymore and just sat down on my haunches right there. You could say I was at my wits’ end.

“Hold on what are you an idiot hold on what are you an idiot hold on what are you an idiot,” I blathered, literally at my wits’ end. “If it was only a day or two, we could cope even if we couldn’t get back. I’d take full stock of the difficulties and grapple with the crisis. Assuming it was type B, of course. But eleven years? Even the currency is different. Who the hell is Soseki Natsume, anyway?”

“Thou shouldst know the illustrious name even if his portrait no longer remains on the currency. At any rate, ’tis type A, so it makes no difference.”

“Eleven years? It makes all the difference. I can’t even use my cell phone.”

Cell phones had already been developed, I think, but there was no base station way out here in the boonies and the system was probably totally different anyway.

Let’s get real, I don’t think my cell carrier even existed eleven years ago.

“If those middle school girls hadn’t given us some of their tea, we wouldn’t even have anything to drink!”

“Thine interpersonal skills are surprisingly robust. Only when it comes to girls. I understand thy sentiment, but do not act as though ’tis my fault.”

“How is this situation anyone’s fault but yours?”

“No, no, no, harken to my words, ’tis my fault, but I am telling thee not to act as though ’tis my fault.”

“…”

What a peach.

Oh wait, I said almost the same exact thing just the other day, didn’t I? Was that influenced by our pairing?

Birds of a feather.

Though it might predate our pairing for all I know.

“Understood? Thou shalt not blame me.”

“I don’t remember going that far…”

“I shall cry. I shall cry my eyes out. Just one word of blame, and I shall be wailing at the top of my lungs that this high school boy abducted me. Heheh, and what will happen then? Thou shalt be apprehended by the police, without any means to identify thyself. An eighteen-year-old thou canst not exist eleven years ago. As a minor with no job and no fixed address, thou shalt be confined for all eternity.”

“You don’t have any means of identifying yourself, either.”

She was just as suspicious a character as I am.

And the fact that “I’ll cry” was the best threat a legendary vampire could muster made me feel like crying.

It was too depressing.

“Phew… Okay then.”

“My my, what’s this? Thou hast forgiven me? Thou art most generous. In that case, I shall deign to forgive thee as well.”

“That’s not what I meant by ‘Okay then.’ And what do you have to forgive, anyway?”

“Hmm, ’tis a fine point. Well, I shall grant thee forgiveness for what happened during spring break.”

“You can’t forgive me for that in exchange for this stupid blunder!”

She was being too blithe about it.

Spring break needed to be left as is.

Even if things feel totally chill between us.

You’ve got to draw the line somewhere.

Got to take it seriously.

“Actually, this could be a valuable experience,” I said. “A one- or two-day time slip wouldn’t feel like the real deal, but coming back this far, now this is interesting. I might just have to forget about my summer homework, but it’s not so bad to immerse ourselves in the world of eleven years ago.”

“’Tis kind of thee to say so.”

“Assuming we can go back.”

Spending the rest of my life in this time would be more than unpleasant, it’d be…impossible?

Mission Impossible?

“Unfortunately, I don’t think those middle school girls will just go on taking care of all my needs.”

“To hear thee consider such an outrageous possibility affords a glimpse of the depths to which thy humanity has sunk.”

“When we get back to the present, how old do you think those girls will be? I wonder if they’ll remember me.”

“Mayhap.”

Be that as it may, Shinobu said.

While she seemed sincerely downhearted about her big blunder (so much so that I might not be able to start calling her Shinobu the Blunderer), she seemed to have recovered somewhat from the initial shock.

Her recovery was surprisingly quick.

Though it might’ve been for show.

“Speaking in earnest, I…believe that I can return us to the present?”

“Yeah?”

“Allow me to explain it step by step, beginning with Kita-Shirahebi Shrine. I made use of that place’s spiritual energy to bring us hither, but ’twas by reason of my arrival that such energy had accumulated in that ‘hangout’ for aberrations in the first place, as ye know.”

“Right, I remember.”

To review: because she, the king of aberrations, had come to this town, “bad things” were drawn to that place as if to a magnet□and if Oshino hadn’t noticed, a Great Yokai War might have broken out.

But that was another story.

Since Shinobu wasn’t arriving in this town for another eleven years (she was likely somewhere overseas, wandering around looking for a suitable place to die), Kita-Shirahebi wasn’t a hangout for aberrations or anything else, it was just one more moldering shrine□

“So it’s impossible, then. We can’t go back.”

“Jump not to such conclusions. Verily ’tis impossible to pursue the course of employing its spiritual store, but that merely dictates that I must needs draw on my own internal energy.”

“Internal energy… But you’ve lost almost all of your vampire power, so that energy doesn’t amount to much, does it?”

“’Twill be fine if thou canst but allow me a taste of thy blood. If thou so doest, I may open a gate with my own strength, and we may return the eleven years to the future.”

“Oh…”

I see.

So that was the plan.

“To travel into the past would be difficult even at the height of my powers, but even without my full strength I should be able to return to the future. If ’tis too trying to jump eleven years at a go, we may hop three years at a time and rest in between. Feel free to praise

and admire me. A kiss of gratitude is also acceptable, if thou art so inclined."

Shinobu closed her eyes and protruded her lips.

Going full tilt on the nymphomaniac highway.

"By the way, my lord, people toss off a word like 'nymphomaniac' as though 'twere nothing, but pondering the term and its implications leads me to fear for its continued use. Might it not get censored?"

"I'd like to joke that you will be, long before the word is, but your point is well taken. Though honestly, I don't really want to get into it…"

It's a wonder that Lolita is still widely available.

Masterpiece or not.

"Ah!"

"What, my lord?"

"I just realized something. Now, I mean eleven years before the present, the regulations were more relaxed. So if we go to the bookstore, I can get my hands on all the classic masterpieces that are hard to come by these days!"

That large bookstore didn't exist yet and we needed to go a little farther afield, but the valuable lineup of titles was worth it.

"Ha! Classic masterpieces? Surely 'twill simply be pedo smut that ye purchase in this era of lax regulation."

"Nope, nope!"

"Were this period's boys' magazines permitted to show tits?"

"Stop steering the conversation in that direction!"

Regulations aside, I would have no problem getting my hands on

valuable out-of-print manga.

And the font in mass-market paperbacks won't be so large that they're hard to read!

And the font in mass-market paperbacks won't be so large that they're hard to read!

And the font in mass-market paperbacks won't be so large that they're hard to read!

And the font in mass-market paperbacks won't be so large that they're hard to read!

…There, I ended up repeating it four times for emphasis.

In any case, knowing that we could get back opened up all kinds of possibilities.

Should I buy stock?

Get rich?

If I bought stock in IT companies now, before the computer bubble, wouldn't their value go through the roof?

Ahh, no good, I didn't have any cash on me.

More than that, it was shameful for me to be dwelling on financial gain.

Got to be better than that.

"Well, whatever we do, since we're here, we might as well have a little fun for a couple of days before we go back. What do you think, Shinobu?"

"If it works for thee, it works for me…but does it work for thy summer homework?"

"Frankly, now that I understand that the risk is so great, jumping back eleven years when we just wanted to go back a day, I don't

care anymore. I give up. Let's put it on hold for now, and if we get back to our time safely, I'll think about it then."

"Hmph. Giving up? 'Tis more like thou art shelving the problem, but I suppose that's only… Huh?"

When Shinobu trailed off in midsentence, I followed her gaze, wondering what was wrong—and saw that she was staring directly at the gates of the Araragi residence, where a little child was standing.

I take back what I said before. I take it all back, every scrap of it.

I identified him all right. It was plenty possible. Even at seven years old. Even eleven years in the past.

They say you know yourself better than anyone does—and the child standing there was Koyomi Araragi.

"Whoaaaa! Super adorable! Might I pounce on him from behind and give him a big hug?!"

"Go ahead and get yourself arrested already."

Turns out that even in this era she was a dangerous little girl, liable to be censored at any moment.

Whose influence could it be?

008

So that's more or less the sequence of events by which Shinobu and I ended up eleven years in the past, but once our way back was reasonably secure I was able to relax a little, and I can't deny that I even started to feel like I might as well enjoy myself a bit. Still, when it came time to get away from the Araragi residence and actually make the most of existing in the past, I bumped up against the stark reality that there was surprisingly little to do.

Even in the past, reality was the enemy.

I realized that, for the same reason I couldn't buy stock, I couldn't purchase any books.

I couldn't muster up the motivation to go to the next town just to browse in the bookstore□and even if I wanted to watch some of the older, more aggressive TV shows, we weren't so far in the past that there were still street televisions.

Now this runs directly counter to what I said before, but while it was definitely the townscape of eleven years ago, the level of difference only served to make me uneasy. It wasn't different enough to make me nostalgic, to make me relish a beloved past.

This might sound churlish, but if we were going to blow it anyway, I wished we could have gone all the way back to the prewar period.

"If we did, anyone as suspicious as thee would be apprehended by the military authorities in the span of a moment and be subjected to torture without any regard for human rights."

"Think so? That bad, huh?"

"Given half the chance, thy words become dangerous, my master, become risky. A more moderately lenient age suits thee better, methinks. Now then, hath Mister Donut come into being yet?"

“They were just celebrating their fortieth anniversary, so there’s no doubt about it—what’s more, I bet there are donuts that you can only find during this period.”

“Oh ho!”

“Sorry to say this after you’ve sunk your teeth into the idea, but we don’t have any money.”

“After I’ve sunk my teeth into it, my mouth stays empty?”

“Yup.”

There was actually a ten-thousand-yen note in my wallet, but it was a new one, so we couldn’t use it.

It would definitely be treated as counterfeit since they had Yukichi Fukuzawa on it both in the past and in the present unlike the new bills with Hideyo Noguchi or Ichiyo Higuchi.

I might not get tortured, but I could well envision the military arresting a mysterious high school student with highly advanced counterfeiting skills.

I figured that even if paper money was no good, we might be able to use coins, though they did have the year engraved on them.

I held on to a sliver of hope as I examined the coins I was carrying one by one, but they all had dates from the future.

Such sophisticated counterfeit coins.

“Hmph,” snorted Shinobu, walking ahead of me as though she were leading the way.

If pressed, I’d say that there were fewer seams in the asphalt than in the present. Not that it mattered in the slightest.

“’Twas an enjoyable lark at the outset, but hath this trip not rapidly descended into tedium? If so it must be, why could I not, if a hug be out of the question, adore thee from afar in thy shota form for a while longer?”

“Just because. Don’t say such creepy things,” I replied, following along behind Shinobu, since I didn’t have anywhere in particular to go. “I mean, it’s just one more facet of the time paradox. I have absolutely no memory of meeting my future self or a little blond girl when I was six or seven, so it would be an issue if he noticed us, even from afar. It would contradict the future.”

“What? ’Tis not as though thou canst recall everything from thy childhood. Hardly can I recall the events of yesteryear.”

“And that’s all right with you? Not even ten or twenty years ago, but…last year?”

“To tell it true, after about the age of thirty I ceased to recall things in terms of years.”

“Thirty! What are you talking about, that’s not even that different from a human!”

“About a third of the time, the name Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade slips my mind. Honestly, ’twas a relief to shorten it to Shinobu Oshino.”

“I hate to remind you, but it was because of that name that your existence became sealed and bound to my shadow.” The girl just kept on getting dumber. “The young Araragi of this time was a pretty smart kid, if I do say so myself. Smarter than I am now, I’ll bet. Forget about remembering or not remembering, if we’re not careful he’ll see right through us.”

“A child so discerning? Art thou not simply viewing the past through rose-colored glasses?”

“Nope. In fish terms, he’s a Napoleon fish.”

“And is that impressive? Speaking in such terms doth not make him seem clever at all… I do not think there is a single fish with the reputation for cleverness.”

“Well, the same Araragi is now total whitebait.”

“Thou reversed time on thy own.”

“Actually…” I stopped walking and looked back—that is, cast my gaze back toward the distant Araragi residence, even though it was already out of sight. Shinobu may have been leading the way, but she was still bound to my shadow, so when I stopped walking she was forced to as well. In reality she wasn’t leading the way at all, it was just that because of the position of the sun she had to be in front of me. “Putting aside whether or not I’d remember, I’ve heard a theory that if you time warp and meet yourself, you’ll both be completely vaporized. It’s a vague recollection… Something like matter and anti-matter, or maybe like a doppelgänger, but either way, you’re supposed to avoid encountering your past self.”

“Hunh? Is that not merely an SF convention? Not enough people have actually time warped for any theory to be developed about it.”

“Sure, that’s true… I can’t deny that I’m just quoting stuff straight from sci-fi novels, but just to be on the safe side…”

I didn’t want to be vaporized in the past.

There was also the possibility that only he would be, but if my past self vanished, wouldn’t my current self still get vaporized? Yikes, I was lost…

This time-travel theory stuff was so convoluted.

It was full up with complications and far-fetched nonsense.

I wondered if the idea that time travel to the future is possible, while time travel to the past isn’t, simply owes to laziness on the part of sci-fi authors who can’t resolve the tangled paradox.

“Don’t blame them, my lord… Always passing the buck.”

“Yeah, well, this situation makes me want to pass the buck!”

“Calm thyself. There is likely no cause for thee to be concerned.” It couldn’t have been out of worry that fast realizing that there was nothing to do, I was feeling uneasy once again—but Shinobu said, “I admit to thee at this late date that, up until now, I did not understand what ye meant by time paradox.”

“Huh?” I was taken aback by her confession. “Um, but I explained it properly, and didn’t we have a whole conversation about it?”

“I feigned understanding, nodded my head in all the right places, and just played along while thine every word went in one ear and out the other.”

“Hey!”

My anime character intro had all kinds of bizarro captions, like that I was the only designated quipper in the series and so on, but I’d been reduced to the plainest possible comeback.

Hey.

“Shinobu, in a novel that’s mostly talk, in what you might even call a conversation drama, there’s no room for a character who just nods along. You said that at last you can admit it to me, but sorry, the statute of limitations isn’t up on that one yet.”

That was just a few hours ago.

What, was the statute of limitations a few seconds?

“And yet, those few hours are what counts,” Shinobu insisted. “Behold, the sun is sinking, and the twilight hour is nigh.”

“Don’t talk as though it’s the end of the world.”

“What I mean is that while I may have lost my power, ’tis the time when I, as an aberration, am revitalized. At long last my eyes are open, at long last my head is clear. The strange and perplexing matter thou hast spoken of makes sense to me now.”

“Sorry, so very sorry, but what I’ve been saying isn’t all that complicated.”

“Let me get straight to the point,” Shinobu said, folding her arms, raising her face, and looking down on me, in that tricky way of hers, even as she looked up at me. “Fret not, for there is no danger of a time paradox.”

“There isn’t?”

“None at all.”

“None.”

“’Tis like fretting over whether or not the sky will fall on thy head. Thou art more than a little chicken, thou art Chicken Little.”

“I mean, between the two, sure, I guess I’d be Chicken Little, but…”

Wait, we were getting off track.

And it was pretty weird she’d know Chicken Little but not the “contradiction” fable□not that they meant the same thing, but they were both classic.

“Be that as it may, the danger is nil, Chicken Little. There is naught to be concerned about.”

The middle of the street is no place for this conversation, Shinobu prompted and enticed, having gotten straight to the point and skipped the rest. Upon reflection, she was right that as we stood there talking in the road, there was no telling when a car might come or who might pass by. I followed after her as prompted.

Speaking of which, this road of eleven years ago was kind of dangerous… I wasn’t totally sure, but I could have sworn there was a proper guardrail along here in the future.

We reached a sidewalk, and perfectly situating ourselves in the fading sunlight, started walking side by side. It was much easier to have a conversation this way, though in our case I didn’t feel there was any real point to my standing closer to the road…

“Ahh, at any rate, ’tis mighty fine.”

“What is?”

“To strut about like this, out in the open. I literally live in the shadows, after all. But as we are unknown to the people of this time, I am able to act freely. I can hardly contain myself.”

“Huh…”

So that was it.

I thought she’d been acting funny, but it seemed like this bit of free time, born of our massive time jump, accidental though it may have been, had her in high spirits.

So that was it: because she stood out as a little blond girl, and because she was sealed in my shadow, Shinobu had no traffic with daylight□

“Hang on,” I said. “It’s normal for a vampire to live in the shadows.”

“Hm? Ah, I suppose so.”

“If you’re feeling that way because Hachikuji was able to come to my room, I guess it kind of makes sense, but you’re fundamentally a denizen of the dark side, aren’t you? A nightwalker shouldn’t be delighting in daylight. The sun is your enemy.”

“Hmm. I suppose I’m still half asleep.” Shinobu scratched her blond head. Coming from her, the reaction seemed crass, too human. “Perhaps the remainder of my explanation should wait until I am back to my proper self. Until the sun has gone down completely, that is.”

“Well, to be honest, I’d like to hear it as soon as possible. When it comes to time paradoxes.”

“Indeed? Fine, the details may be incorrect, but I shall offer then a rough exposition for the time being. There is a general outline to the flow of fate, and this cannot be altered.”

“What?”

“That which happened will surely happen, and that which did not can never. That which happens must happen, and so doth, and that which doth not must not, and so doth not. I do not mean to say that fate is immutable□merely that the outline doth not change. In other words, the universe shall correct itself for any deviation caused by

what we do here in the past, within a certain margin of error. Provided we swear off anything dire."

"Anything dire, like?" Did something on the level of me meeting myself fall short?

"Mm. On the subject of thine original goal, thy summer homework, let us say for the sake of argument that we traveled one day into the past, and ye stealthily completed it unbeknownst to thy counterpart from that time. However, if 'tis an amount that thou couldst complete in one day, then with a little tenacity ye might have stayed up all night and completed it without returning to the past. And if not, thou wouldst not be scolded so badly."

"…Huh?"

What was she saying?

I mean, all sorts of occult sources held that the outline of fate is fixed—the world principle, the cosmic will, the Akashic Records, this and that great prophecy—but it also applied to time travel?

Really?

"Hold on a sec, if that's true, then there was never any point in coming to the past to do my homework. If I return to the past and am able to get it done, then there was no need to return to the past; if I return to the past and can't get it done, then there was still no point in returning to the past…"

"Yup. No point, sorry," Shinobu—little Miss Shinobu—abandoned all her old-timey phraseology and agreed like a kid.

Was she playing dumb, or was she actually dumb? How adorable.

"Ye implored me to take thee back in time, and I simply granted thy wish out of a desire for donuts."

"The truth comes out!"

Her motivation was just that simple.

Sure. Why would she ever be worried about my homework? Come to think of it, when she first pointed it out, more than anything else she was just trying to annoy me.

Even if she didn't mean any harm, I'm pretty sure she didn't mean well.

"I also had a notion to attempt time travel, which had heretofore existed for me only on paper. I had always hoped to assay it at least once in my life."

"Don't get me involved in your bucket list!"

"Thou art the one who brought it up."

"What are you, a nefarious venture capitalist taking advantage of people's innocent daydreams?" It was a roundabout way of denouncing her as a swindler. "To turn it around, you're saying that even if I finish my homework in the past, my future self would return to the past for some other reason and end up doing the homework anyway?"

"Indeed, little import was accorded to the ability to time-travel in Ghost Sweeper Mikami."

"Stop explaining everything through manga."

Although for my part, I did keep relying on sci-fi novels.

This goddamn conversation was all fluff.

"Putting it in the most pessimistic and defeatist way possible," intoned Shinobu, "my point is that worrying over the details will avail thee naught. 'Tis all the same, past or present: thou canst not do what thou canst not do, and thou canst do naught but what thou canst."

"All the same…"

When she put it like that□well.

It wasn't as if I didn't get it.

The struggle against an opponent as unfathomable as fate is never going to go your way, in a past reached via time travel or anywhere else.

Reality is the enemy, even in the past.

The battle with reality is always a losing battle.

“I understand now, Shinobu. You’re saying that we couldn’t pull off a barbaric feat like altering history, or the future, even if we wanted to, embedded within fate as we are.”

“More or less.”

Hm.

So to return to our earlier example, if there is a rule that, should now me encounter seven-year-old me, one or both of us would be completely vaporized, present me and past me would never be able to meet in the first place.

And even if, for the sake of argument, I did have some money from this time, some kind of impediment would surely crop up and prevent me from buying stock in an IT company. And by the same token, I wouldn’t be able to get my hands on any valuable titles at the bookstore.

“So I can assume there won’t be any butterfly effect-type thing.”

“What is this butter-something of which thou speakest?”

“You don’t know?”

“Glazing something with butter and frying it in oil?”

“Appetizing, if erroneous.”

It would probably taste like fried cheese.

No, the butter would just melt, wouldn’t it?

“It’s the theory that one minute difference in initial conditions can

yield a massive change later on, and…”

I’d only heard about it from Hanekawa, so I didn’t understand it all that well, which made it hard to explain. Something like a single butterfly flapping its wings in China causing a whirlwind in Brazil□but if you pressed me as to how, honestly I’d just have to throw up my hands.

I thought about calling Hanekawa and asking, but my device was out of range, and the Hanekawa of this time didn’t have a cell phone anyway.

She was probably about six years old, too.

……

I wanted to meet her.

Since doing so now wouldn’t change fate or make it so that I couldn’t meet her in the future, I dearly wished for a glimpse of Loli Hanekawa.

If we weren’t supposed to meet, then we just wouldn’t anyway.

Loli Hanekawa.

It had such an alluring ring to it.

“Oi, why art thou grinning? Give me a proper explanation of this swallowtail effect or whatever ye call it.”

“I don’t even know how to come back to such highfalutin’ jokes,” I said, but proceeded nonetheless. “Let me put it this way. A curveball appears to change direction right in front of the batter, but in reality, the change began the moment the ball left the pitcher’s hand.”

“Now I see.”

“You do?!”

From that feather-light explanation?!

Incidentally, a curveball is created by the rotation of the ball and the concomitant air resistance, so apparently the technique is quite different with a softball versus a hardball.

“Hm. Then ’tis no cause for concern. No such monarch effect shall occur. If this world be changed by the beat of a butterfly’s wings, then ’twill change even if they fail to beat. So it is.”

“Is it? I don’t really get it… But a difference in initial value leading to a great calamity is persuasive on a theoretical level, at least. It’s like the steering wheel of a car.”

“Allow me to give an easily understood analogy then, in emulation of thine own,” Shinobu prefaced. “A child who causeth trouble under the influence of manga or video games will still cause trouble, even without the influence of manga or video games.”

“…”

That’s a dangerous analogy!

Easily understood though it may be!

“Well…I think I get it. Let’s just say for now that I do. Maybe that’s how it is. Influence exists per se, but that doesn’t necessarily mean it alters the outcome.”

Actually, didn’t Senjogahara say something similar once?

In the end I contributed to resolving the issues that she was harboring, but maybe it wasn’t really me□I just happened to be there, and even if I hadn’t been, the story might have turned out the same.

She was nice enough to tell me that for that very reason, she was glad it was me□but if you turned it around.

That meant the only thing your will can affect is your own life, not anything so grandiose as fate or the world.

Hmm.

That might make everything seem futile, but it also affords some peace□as if the stability of the vehicle we're riding in has been fully guaranteed.

"I see. If that's the case, then I'm a little relieved. In a nutshell, nothing catastrophic could happen due to your or my individual actions."

"Were it not so, then I, prudent as I am, embodiment of circumspection that I am, would not have treated us to this trip through time at thy request merely because I desired Mister Donut."

"Yup. Whatever anyone says, there's no one as prudent and circumspect as you."

"Though that Aloha brat did absolutely forbid me."

"Whaaaaat?!"

I was so shaken that, once again, my comeback was a mess.

But I think we can overlook that, given just how shocking Shinobu's declaration was.

"Wha? Wha? Wha? You did something Oshino absolutely told you not to?! Like it was nothing?!"

"I did, but so what-nyon?"

"No cutesiness! What character are you, even?"

Don't be flippant, not in a scene where things seem like they're about to get really serious.

We can conduct this conversation with just a touch more urgency.

"Aye, the Aloha brat forbade it, and so I refrained from it. But now the Aloha brat is gone, so 'tis fine."

"You think like an insect, you know."

Are you more mosquito than vampire?

You're so poorly wired you lack the capacity for thought altogether.

Even slime molds think things over more than you do.

I helplessly and pointlessly gazed at our surroundings.

At the world of the past.

At this world about which I now knew the terrifying truth, that Oshino had absolutely forbidden our coming here.

"Are you for real? When that guy said don't do something, he tended to be right. You've got that innocent smile on your face like you don't think for a second that you did anything wrong, but let me ask you, just to be sure. Do you understand what you've done?"

"I do not."

"Right! You do not! Thank you very much. But I do. I do, okay? And I don't blame you. I do not blame you."

She couldn't help it, being an idiot.

After almost half a year together since spring break, it finally sank in. Very sorry it took me so long to comprehend something so painfully self-evident.

You're a complete idiot.

Since long before you became a little girl.

Not because I influenced you or anything.

"Um, did Oshino say anything else? About why you absolutely mustn't try?"

"I am not certain. Like as not he did, but if he did, I no longer recall it. Hence I surmise 'tis that history might be irrevocably altered if something dire doth happen."

"…"

"Rest easy. 'Twas because of people like thee that they concocted

the tale of Chicken Little, ye fool. Thou hast said it thyself, dost thou truly think that something dire could come of our paltry individual actions?"

"I guess not… But for my reference, when you say dire, what does that actually mean? Give me an example."

"Something irrevocable… Dropping a nuclear bomb on this nation's center of governance, for instance… Though perhaps from a global perspective, 'tis perfectly revocable."

"Not likely. One whole state, gone."

"Countries disappear from this planet often enough."

"…Whenever you drift into satire, the conversation turns heavy real fast."

"I have seen so many disappear with mine own eyes. But, aye, if something on the level of the destruction of a star were to occur, then history might be greatly altered. If we extinguished the sun, for instance."

"…Okay."

Good enough, let's leave it at that.

If history wouldn't change unless we did something of that magnitude, we were solidly in no-need-to-worry territory.

A high school student who couldn't do his summer homework satisfactorily and a little blond girl who loves Mister Donut—we'd never disturb anything on a stellar scale.

Even if we did, it still might not affect history. Our galaxy itself is small potatoes from the perspective of the ever-expanding universe.

Thus our apprehensions were dispelled—fools that we were.

In the end, we'd forgotten.

That Shinobu Oshino was a singular, legendary vampire with the

power to distort reality—that I was a singular thrall who had under my belt a “miraculous” victory over that vampire.

That we were a fearsome two-man cell who could very well change the world.

History. The universe. Fate itself.

It’s not the sort of thing you say about yourself, but if I do say so myself—silly me, I’d completely forgotten.

009

There was a time when the phrase “be the only one, rather than number one” was making the rounds with some of the cognoscenti, and while it does sound great and can really give you a boost when you’re feeling down, it doesn’t hold up in the cold light of day.

First and foremost is the objection that becoming the only one might actually be harder than being number one since most of the time, most people are pretty run-of-the-mill. They can’t acquire individuality except through competition with others because being the only one still means being one of them. No, in that sense, the call to “be the only one, rather than number one” is overly correct and maybe, for that very reason, offers no consolation.

Next up is the objection that people need to know the cruelty of pushing on others, and the atrocity of forcing on oneself, the isolation of being the only one, the solitude of being unique.

If you think about it for a second, telling someone to be “singular” is a repulsive command—true, the more friends you make, the lower, perhaps, your intensity as a human. But I’ve started thinking lately—isn’t the whole point of friends that you make them despite the fact that it lowers your human intensity?

I’ve been able to start thinking that way.

It was, of course, Tsubasa Hanekawa who opened my eyes on that score, but—there was definitely someone else, too.

Mayoi Hachikuji.

She, who wandered lost and alone for over ten years, and for that entire time was an “only one”—helped to open my eyes.

So.

“Let’s save Hachikuji.”

The idea came to me quite naturally, if suddenly. Right after Shinobu told me that a time paradox would absolutely not occur, could not occur.

There was nothing, no trigger.

It came to me there in the middle of that sidewalk.

If anything—I’d say it came to me when I saw the “Pedestrians Only” sign.

“Huh? Didst thou say something?”

“You heard me—let’s save Hachikuji,” I repeated with something approaching deep determination, like I was trying to convince myself in response to Shinobu’s dubious tone. “I’ve been thinking about it—why eleven years ago? And why May thirteenth, why the second Saturday in May? Even if we deviated from our target time coordinates, it seems strange to me—we tried to go back one day, and it’d make sense if we ended up going back one hour, or one year, or I would even concede ten years, but to go back eleven years, or more precisely eleven years and three months—there must be a reason for such pinpoint accuracy. Of course, there’s the fact that it was your first attempt at time travel, but I have a feeling there’s more to it.”

“More to it—why dost thou think so?”

“Just my intuition.”

“Intuition.”

“Maybe I should call it a premonition—a premonition that it wasn’t a deviation, but an adjustment. That it didn’t end up this way because it went wrong—it ended up this way because it went right. Since it’s a feeling about the past, though, I guess it might be more precise to call it a regret.”

“…”

Shinobu started to say something then fell silent.

Knowing her, she was likely going to start up the usual banter and poke fun at me, but she no doubt thought better of it upon seeing my face. A testament.

To the desperation written on it.

It wasn't the kind of expression that said I've got a great idea.

"I'm pretty sure tomorrow is the day Hachikuji dies."

"…The day that lost lass dies?"

"I'll tell you upfront that I'm not a hundred percent sure. Hachikuji only said that it was a little over ten years ago not precisely eleven years. Maybe she thought there was no point in getting into the specifics, maybe she herself didn't remember anymore. Your 600-year memory makes for an extreme example, but it's perfectly normal to be fuzzy about something that happened over ten years ago. However the one thing I do know for sure is that tomorrow is Mother's Day."

Mother's Day.

Mayoi Hachikuji died on Mother's Day.

In a traffic accident.

"So if I'm right, Hachikuji will lose her life tomorrow on the bumper of a car on her way to see her mother, from whom she'd been separated."

"Aye, 'twas something along those lines…"

"So."

So, I said. Staring at that street sign again.

"So let's save her."

"…"

“I’ve been thinking—given that we’re here in the past anyway, what might we accomplish? Acquiring out-of-print books or buying stock is all very well, but…isn’t there something more meaningful, something more significant—”

I couldn’t express it well, but if I had to:

Something fateful.

“—that we can accomplish?”

“…Did we not discuss the fact we can accomplish naught but moments ago?”

For a time paradox not to occur means just this—we may not do anything dire, Shinobu remarked, sounding just a little appalled.

Distantly, as though she couldn’t keep up with my earnestness.

“Yup,” I nodded. It wasn’t like I’d forgotten. “Well, please hear me out. First, I thought of Senjogahara. Isn’t there anything I could do for Hitagi Senjogahara, my girlfriend?”

“Boasting about thy love life, art thou?”

“Nah. Boasting… If you want to look at it that way, what can I do? At this point in the time stream, Senjogahara must be living in a so-called mansion that I’ve only heard about, not in Tamikura Apartments like she does now.”

“Hmm. And that ‘mansion’ has been replaced by a road in the present?”

“Yeah. So I thought maybe I could take a cell-phone pic of this ‘mansion’ in all its glory as a souvenir.”

“Something so modest should be possible. The data within thy cellular telephone might vanish thanks to a mystery power when we return to the present, but ’tis worth taking on the challenge. There seems to be no risk.”

“Yeah.” I decided against discussing the term mystery power, which

didn't sound nearly as fishy as it should have. "Even if I can't use the phone part of my cell, I should still be able to use the camera function—some historical impediment might intervene just at the moment I try to take the pic so that I can't after all, but like you say: it's worth taking on the challenge… But then I started to think, what's the point?"

"Wherefore? Would that simple woman not be delighted?"

"Simple woman…"

I was sensing hostility. Was it just my imagination?

"I mean, think about it, she probably already has pictures of her old house. It's not like they were burned out of their home or anything."

"Hahaha. Aye, I don't expect anything so comical as a home fire occurred. 'Twould be just too unfortunate."

"I'm pretty sure I saw some books on Senjogahara's shelf that looked like photo albums…in which case, a photo wouldn't make much of a souvenir at all."

"'Tis exactly why it couldst, too. But in essence thy words ring true."

"So then I thought, might I not solve Senjogahara's problems now, eleven years ago?"

"Mm? By that girl's problems, dost thou mean the Crab of Weight… no, 'twas something else. Not the crab, but in truth her family—"

"Yes. Her family problems," I said, finishing the sentence for Shinobu. "Senjogahara's mother being taken in by a nefarious cult, the divorce settlement—all of it. I thought maybe I could nip those problems in the bud before they happened."

"Thou canst not. For 'twould alter the fate of a person…no, of many."

"Probably, yeah."

I didn't try to counter Shinobu's negativity. I couldn't. I didn't need her to tell me; there was no way one guy, yours truly, could pull off such an extravagant feat.

No way.

"The challenge might be worth taking on," I noted, "but there's the possibility that it'll just make things worse—I know all too well the dangers of sticking your nose into other families' business."

And if I might add.

"I have no inkling of what I could even do to put the Senjogahara family on a better trajectory. Especially at this point eleven years in the past."

As far as I'd heard, Senjogahara's awful family problems had yet to arise—in fact, you could say they were in their honeymoon phase.

Father, and mother, and daughter.

The three of them, going to the observatory together to gaze at the stars—that's what it was like at this time.

"If we'd gone back two years instead, maybe I'd find that bastard Kaiki and royally kick his ass, but at eleven years ago, the lying swindler's probably still in college. Even if I kicked his ass now, I'll bet the deviation would be corrected for in the intervening nine years."

"Methinks thou couldst not match Kaiki even in his college days. 'Twould make quite a punch line when he turned the tables and took thee for everything thou hadst."

For all those counterfeit bills, Shinobu appended acidly.

Yeah, well, not much I could say to that. Honestly, I didn't think I could beat him even if he was in elementary school.

"I really wish I could do something about it—for her part, Senjogahara looks on the bright side and says how it was precisely because she experienced that miserable period that she now has the

good fortune to be dating young mister Araragi here, but even so, the two years that she spent with the Crab of Weight were, despite her weightlessness, too heavy to bear. That probably falls under the heading of 'something I can't do,' though."

"Probably."

"By the same token, I don't think there's anything I could do for Hanekawa's situation at home. Well, if we're just talking hypothetically here, there might not be nothing I could do for the Hanekawas□"

She'd be about six at this time□which is to say, her problems had already "arisen." Solving problems that have yet to arise, as in Senjogahara's case, has an extraordinarily high difficulty rating, but if the problems have already arisen, then surely I could find some way to deal with them.

But.

"□but it must be absolutely impossible. Whatever has infected the Hanekawa family goes beyond the level of anything that one high school student or one vampire could fix."

"Aye," Shinobu agreed with me for once. Without hesitation. "The Afflicting Cat and Black Hanekawa are one thing, but most wretchedly was I outdone by that former class president herself□if possible, I want naught to do with it."

"Yeah… Making the wrong move would just make it worse… Never mind Kaiki, I don't think I could beat even six-year-old Hanekawa. If I tried something, I'm sure she'd just talk me out of it."

"Aye."

"Much as I'd like to meet Loli Hanekawa, I'm not sure how I feel about becoming a criminal."

"Need we consider such a possibility?"

Well, that last was a joke.

Senjogahara's family was one thing, but I couldn't conjure a concrete image of what an "improved situation" would look like for the Hanekawas. Of course, there must have been a time when things were better in that house, but…I didn't imagine it was now, eleven years ago.

Hanekawa no doubt didn't share Senjogahara's value system—where a happy present is possible precisely because of an unhappy past.

Not sharing it at all.

She in fact abhorred it.

To the point of self-denial—ultimately, Hanekawa hated more than anyone else her own brilliant self, her happy self.

That disgust, that hate.

Gave birth to the white cat. The black cat.

"If there's anything I can do, I want to try—but I'll bet that's also 'something I can't do.'"

"Aye. I believe thou art thinking rightly. And there is naught thou canst do for Monkey Girl or Miss Bangs, either. 'Tis exactly as that detestable Aloha brat said."

People just go and get saved on their own.

Nobody can save anybody else—

"Mm-hmm. And yet."

It seemed like Shinobu was trying to wrap things up—but everything up until now had been nothing more than a preamble. I was utterly worthless, unable to do anything for Senjogahara or Hanekawa, and yet.

And yet.

"I think we can save Hachikuji."

“Why dost thou think so? Despite thy peculiar confidence, ’tis by no means assured.”

“Well—it was an accident that she got hit by a car, right? It’s not like someone’s family life, where things keep piling up, and by the time you notice it’s too late. If a momentary, chance event can be avoided, can’t the whole thing be averted?”

“Well…I am sorry to throw cold water on thy hopes, considering thy feelings, and thy relationship with the lass… But much as I do not wish to say it, I must tell thee that ’tis futile. ’Tis not so different from the cases of Miss Tsundere or the former class president as ye imagine.”

Shinobu was in fact mumbling evasively. Because our connection went beyond words, because my feelings, my excitement itself got transmitted to her through my shadow, it must have been that much harder for her to say.

“For instance, tomorrow? I know not how ye might do it, but let us imagine that tomorrow, ye manage to guard against the harm that is to come to that lost lass. Let us say that tomorrow will not be her last day. Truly, ye might be able to do that much—and yet. If ye should succeed, the accident will happen the next day, or the next, merely put off for a time.”

“…”

“Or perhaps ’twould not be a traffic accident at all. It matters not. Within a few days that lost lass would lose her life in one way or another. Like as not, that established fact cannot be altered. Whatever thou art thinking of doing, ’twill simply delay the inevitable—simply postpone it.”

Shinobu’s words weighed heavily on me—but I, too, could foresee that. Even I wasn’t asking for so much.

Hachikuji would die.

Tomorrow, the next day, I didn’t know—but there was no way around it. It was fate.

Even so.

Even. So.

“That’s okay.”

“?”

“What I’m saying is, even so, as long as she doesn’t die tomorrow—as long as it’s not on Mother’s Day, Hachikuji won’t become an aberration.”

That young lady, Mayoi Hachikuji—it was on Mother’s Day that she became lost because she died without seeing her mother.

So if nothing happened tomorrow, if she didn’t meet with an accident or anything and got to see her mother—then that kid.

Would be satisfied, whatever else happened.

She might die but would never be lost.

After dying—

She wouldn’t linger in death.

“…”

Hearing this, Shinobu said—nothing.

I assumed she’d laugh in my face or give me the works for being inane, but—at least that didn’t happen.

I hadn’t missed the mark.

Not badly enough to speak of, anyway.

“Interesting.” That was Shinobu’s comment after some time had passed. “Interesting. Frankly, I think ’tis worth a try.”

“You do?”

“Aye. Success is not assured, of course. In fact, I expect that we will

fail. We must work from the presumption that 'tis fundamentally hopeless. But there is value in assaying that which is presumed to be hopeless…mayhap." While the final note wasn't particularly inspiring, Shinobu assented to my plan in so many words, was kind enough to assent to it. "After all, aberrations like myself exist outside the framework of fate—by virtue of which such barbarisms as time travel are possible. Therefore, if she can but avoid the crucial moment—her transformation into an aberration, and only that, might yet be averted."

If she can.

Yes.

Mayoi Hachikuji wouldn't have to wander, lost—for over ten years, all alone, with no one to rely on, rejecting any and all who approached her, her solitude more profound than that of anyone else in this town.

I wouldn't be able to rescue her.

But I could save her.

"From a risk management perspective," Shinobu continued, "if fate dictates her turning, 'twill all be for naught in the end. If Mother's Day be the day it must happen, then rather than a day or two's deviation, perchance 'twill be delayed until next year. And—"

"And she'll be waylaid by a Lost Cow? Sure, the probability of that is likely very high. But if fate were really that obstinate, I very much doubt the time warp would have brought you and me back so precisely to the day before Mother's Day eleven years ago," I declared, with fierce resolution. "The reason you and I are here. The reason we came here. It's not to do my summer homework, or to get my hands on out-of-print books, or to buy stock—it's to save Hachikuji."

Yes. That was our fate, I said—fiercely, forcefully.

Taking no lessons from history about the tragic ends that await those who invoke fate as a justification.

010

Treading the paths of memory.

Drawing out pieces of information, one by one.

I was fairly certain Hachikuji's mother's surname was Tsunade—I recalled hearing that.

I was also fairly certain that Mrs. Tsunade's place wasn't that far from Hanekawa's and Senjogahara's—near that park (whose name I still didn't know how to read, Namishiro or Rohaku or whatever) where I first met Hachikuji.

That was where she was headed—and it was in its vicinity that she suffered her accident.

Did she say the car hit her while she was in a crosswalk?

While the light was green—that much, at least, stayed with me, no need to dig around in my memory for it, just a briefing to bring everyone up to speed.

But while her destination, that is, her goal, the last stop, was clear, I didn't know the location of the place she'd called home while she was still alive.

It could be in the next town over, in fact.

A child carrying that gigantic backpack could walk the distance, so it couldn't be too far, I conjectured, but that being said, she might have ridden a train or bus part of the way for all I knew.

From how she talked about it, I had the image of her walking the entire way, but I couldn't say for certain, and anyway, she might have been engaging in some fifth-grade bravado.

Or maybe I was just remembering it wrong.

It all sounded so easy, all we had to do was prevent a traffic accident—and I'd actually assumed it'd be easy to prevent one that we knew was occurring the next day, but faced with the reality of the situation, it started to seem unexpectedly hard.

Hmmm.

It wasn't going as I expected. What to do?

"I have an excellent idea."

"Oh? You mean it? If you've got a good idea, Miss Shinobu, you've got to tell me."

"Smash every traffic light at every crosswalk in town!"

"Accidents would go through the roof! You want to be a terrorist?!"

"Well, since thou art a terrololist."

"Did you just say that like it's actually clever?!"

Thus the process of trial and error reached an impasse.

More of a dead end than a lost child.

A blind alley.

We still had a whole night, so there was no need to fret… For now, I decided to try and pin down the location of Mrs. Tsunade's house.

I figured that I could at least get some thinking done even as we walked or wandered.

Hachikuji had told me Mrs. Tsunade's address on that future Mother's Day, and we'd even reached the place, but of course I didn't remember, so we had to start from scratch.

"Hark."

"What?"

“One thing” Shinobu, who’d gotten tired of walking and was clinging to me so I could carry her (normally, not princess-style in my arms), proposed along the way, “One thing we might do to prevent the accident might be to carry our warning directly to the lass’s mother who dwells in the house of Tsunade.”

“Hm?”

“We mean to confirm the location of the Tsunade residence in any event, so why not use the intercom to inform her?”

“Your daughter who was taken to live with her father after your divorce is going to be in a traffic accident tomorrow. She’s secretly coming to visit you for Mother’s Day. Please telephone her and urge her to be careful. Oh yes, and since we’re here, do you think you could tell us where the Hachikuji residence is? Like that?”

“Aye. Dost thou find fault with such a plan?”

“Ah, well, let’s think about it for a second, shall we? If we jump to conclusions, our judgment might be faulty. Okay, hmm, are there or aren’t there any problems with that plan? Uh, yes!”

Problems and nothing but.

If she reported us, the jig was up.

It was more realistic than smashing all the traffic lights, but

“It’s probably not advisable for me to meet Mrs. Tsunade.”

“For what reason?”

“For every possible reason… But I guess until her parents’ divorce, Hachikuji did live around here. Even if we can’t ask Mrs. Tsunade directly, we might be able to find out something from the neighbors…”

And just as I was thinking, from someone passing by, for instance, Shinobu and I caught sight of a figure approaching us head-on. Perfect timing no, actually, it was hardly good.

More like the worst imaginable.

Not only was I carrying a little blond girl.

The person approaching us was also a little girl.

A little girl of about six walking along reading a book.

Wearing glasses.

With a single braid in back.

You could tell she was the serious type just by looking at her.

“What an exceptionally adorable little girl wait, it’s Tsubasa Hanekawa!”

“Eek!”

Loli Hanekawa shrieked and put some distance between us. As she did, she hurled the book she’d been reading.

A direct hit on Shinobu’s head.

“Arghh!”

Shinobu fell to the ground like a bug sprayed with insecticide.

All of this in the space of a single second.

“Wh-Who are you?! And how do you know my name?! No, don’t answer, I can see for myself. You’re a deviant!”

“…”

Loli Hanekawa despised me instantly.

The shock was enough to make me want to fall to my knees.

But this was amazing. Even at six years old, Hanekawa was obviously Hanekawa.

I thought I’d only been able to recognize seven-year-old Koyomi

Araragi because he was me, Koyomi Araragi, but no, it was surprisingly obvious—or it might just be that I recognized her because she was Hanekawa and I was so deeply attached to her.

Looking so serious even eleven years ago?

But wait. Koyomi Araragi—was laying eyes on Tsubasa Hanekawa in civilian clothes. For the first time.

She was in elementary school, so she didn't have a uniform!

"Hubba-hubba! Hanekawa's civilian clothes are the cat's pajamas!"

"Eek!"

"And tsurupeta Hanekawa is the bee's knees! Wow, Hanekawa is as flat as a board!"

"Eek! Eek! Eek!"

Loli Hanekawa ran around madly trying to escape.

Hanekawa, frightened!

Of me!

"Calm thyself. I am receiving thine emotions painfully clearly, but do not lose sight of thy original objective. If thou art arrested here, 'twill be impossible for thee to be released by the morrow…"

"Urk."

Shinobu's warning, delivered as she crouched upon the pavement, came in the nick of time and kept me from flinging myself on Loli Hanekawa.

With all my might I clung to a mental picture that my shoes were sewn to the ground.

What I really wanted to cling to, however, was Loli Hanekawa.

Self-control self-control self-control self-control self-control!

“Such a scary guy… Standing stock still, shedding bitter tears… If there are high school students like him, then the world is a pitch-black place after all…”

Loli Hanekawa’s fear knew no bounds.

Trauma now under construction, to critical acclaim.

“Y-Young lady…” I addressed Loli Hanekawa, doing everything I could to sound like a sincere gentleman and no doubt failing. Give me an E for effort, though. “Well, uh, I know your name because of your nametag. Oh, and I’d like to ask for some simple directions.”

“…”

A skeptical stare.

No helping that Loli Hanekawa wasn’t wearing a nametag.

What a pointless lie.

Damn, little girl though she was, it hurt to get the “looking at a stranger” eye from Hanekawa. The “looking at a loser” part of it, on the other hand, felt kinda good.

“Is there a Tsunade residence in this neighborhood?”

“…”

Still tight-lipped, Loli Hanekawa pointed to the right.

Well now.

She did know. Even as a little girl Hanekawa never did things by halves.

“Thank you. You know everything, don’t you?”

“I don’t know everything. I just know what I know.”

With that, Loli Hanekawa took off, her feet pattering.

Like she was running away from me. Okay, she really was.

“Do you think I just altered history?”

“’Tis unlikely.”

All that altered was thy favorability rating, quipped Shinobu, getting up off the ground.

Being hit by the book and falling off me, without having done anything to deserve it, she’d gotten a raw deal with that bit of slapstick.

And she wasn’t even angry, though I suppose such forbearance is to be expected of a 600 year old.

“Not with such a minor brush.”

“Still,” I said, “I can’t help but worry about the ramifications of meeting a past version of someone I know. Was the fact that it was Hanekawa good or bad? Do you think maybe she’ll become my girlfriend in the future because of this?”

“Not a chance,” Shinobu laid it out for me. More forcefully than necessary, for some reason. “And in the unlikely event that there were a chance, when that girl prefers not to remember something”

“Hunh?”

“No, ’tis nothing. Anyway, ye need not fear. Anyway, we know which way this Tsunade residence lies, so let us make haste.”

“Right.”

Then, while we were on the path indicated to us by Loli Hanekawa, our sights set on the Tsunade residence I remembered.

That eleven years later, I tossed the same question at Hanekawa, at which time she flatly answered no.

Is it possible to know, eleven years in the past, something that you don’t eleven years in the future? Or maybe eleven-years-later Hanekawa only acted like she didn’t know because of the circumstances, I thought as I kept walking, trusting in Loli

Hanekawa's words.

No matter how far we went, there was no Tsunade residence to be found.

What we ultimately reached was a police box.

"She tricked us…"

Even as a little girl, Hanekawa had it all under control.

011

And yet, this might be an appropriate time to say, “God works in mysterious ways” (although honestly I don’t care for that saying) because thanks to that police box we learned the locations of both Mrs. Tsunade’s house and the Hachikuji place.

There wasn’t much to it. I asked the officer on duty, “Excuse me, I was wondering if you could give me directions.”

No tricks, just a request for assistance. Rather than a desperate, high-stakes gamble, it felt more like there was nothing to lose, like my approach was more a gag than anything, but the policewoman quickly responded, “Mrs. Tsunade’s place? Let me see…”

I thought, For real? but realized that this was a time when people were terribly free with personal information, at least in comparison with now (the present).

“Things are really tough for poor Mrs. Tsunade, aren’t they? After the divorce, she seemed to age overnight. She puts on a brave act, but you can see the weariness in her face. No surprise there, that woman really loves her only daughter. Now what was her name? Give me a second, I’ll remember. I’ve got a great memory, comes with the territory. Mayoi, that’s it. Cute kid, but it seems like she never comes to visit. Well, I’m a neutral party, and I don’t want to criticize the father, but…”

I listened as she went on and on like that.

For almost an hour.

In the course of which I became an expert in the internal affairs of the Hachikuji (that is, the Tsunade) family.

No matter how lax protections were for personal info during these years, the policewoman’s lips were a little too loose.

She'd be liable to be sued in the present.

"By the way, what's your relationship to the Tsunades?" she asked at the very end, finally minding her duties.

And my response?

"I'm a friend," I said. "A friend of Mayoi's."

…I tried to play it cool, but sensing the policewoman narrowing her eyes at the suspicious profile of a high school student claiming to be friends with a very young girl, I beat it as fast as I could.

The pell-mell retreat of a half-vampire boy.

Not the sort of thing you see every day.

"All right, that policewoman drew me a map of the neighborhood! With this I'm invincible. Like Mario after he gets a star in Super Mario Brothers!"

"Is thine analogy so vivid that thou must utter it so forcefully?"

The pell-mell flight came to an end at that park.

The park with the name I couldn't read.

We sat down on a bench and opened up the (really excellent) hand-drawn map, and while we were perusing it, Shinobu asked, "Which came first, Super Nintendo or Super Mario?"

"Mm?"

No, hang on.

I got confused for a second, but it's obviously Super Mario.

In fact, it might even be that Super Nintendo was Super Nintendo because of Super Mario.

"At any rate," Shinobu said, "one cannot but admire the sensibilities of those who refer to the Super Nintendo as the SNES… I ever wished that mine own former name might be abbreviated in some

similarly ingenious fashion…”

“You mean that one?” I’d sworn never to call her by that name again, so I ended up just using a vague demonstrative.

“Heh, a vampire who hath forgotten her true name…”

“Don’t try to make it sound cool.”

She just had a bad memory.

We were checking the map as we exchanged this idle banter.

Mrs. Tsunade’s house.

And Hachikuji’s house.

“They’re not as far apart as I thought… It might be kind of tough on the legs of an elementary school kid, but you wouldn’t even need a bicycle to cover this distance.”

At least I was liberated from worrying what to do if she’d taken public transportation.

Forced to consider every contingency, I might not know what to do if she’d ridden in a taxi like a celebrity, but if she had, saving her was beyond me.

You’ve gotta be kidding me.

Is what I would think.

“Okay□so all we have to do is find the shortest distance between the Hachikuji and Tsunade residences and keep an eye on the crosswalk between them.”

“Well, I wonder, my lord…”

Just as I was feeling like I had settled the matter for the moment□feeling, to put it simply, like we were over the hump□Shinobu offered me this bitter pill.

Incidentally, she wasn’t sitting next to me on the bench but in my

lap.

Her shoulder blade pressed against my chest.

“What?” Would she be surprised if I licked the nape of her neck, I thought aimlessly. “There some problem with my idea? I was also thinking we need to find somewhere to sleep and get ready for tomorrow. Like maybe that abandoned cram school.”

“Listen…” Shinobu suddenly raised her head so she was looking up at me and said, “However short the shortest Tsunade residence-Hachikuji residence route might be, there is bound to be more than one pedestrian crossing betwixt them.”

Up close, I realized afresh how enchanting the little girl’s lips were, and I wondered seriously whether imagining immoral things about them amounted to a crime. Then□

“Oh.” I got her point. “Right, and if we include pedestrian crossroads, the number increases even further.”

“There be no such designation.”

“But a pedestrian scramble is basically a pedestrian crossroads. And if anyone stops to chat in the crosswalk, that’s pedestrian crosstalk.”

“‘Pedestrian crosstalk’… Sounds doubly dull.”

“How about ‘pedestrian crossfire’? Not dull at all.”

“’Tis reminiscent of The Matrix.”

“So you’ve watched that too…”

“And what is more, footbridges are properly termed pedestrian bridges and so form another type of crossing. Beyond which there are also underground crosswalks. Considered together, the candidates for our vigilance reach voluminous proportions.”

“Well… It’s extraordinarily difficult to have a traffic accident on a footbridge or in an underground walkway, and if there’d been an accident of that magnitude in my town, even I would remember

it…”

After all, at this time I was a wunderkind.

A wonder child.

“But Shinobu. Why are you so well informed about street traffic?”

“’Twas instilled in me by that Aloha brat.”

“Natch.”

In that case, the question was why Oshino bothered to be well informed about street traffic…but then I should never be surprised that Oshino knew something.

He didn’t know everything, he just knew unnecessary stuff.

“By the by,” Shinobu enlightened me, “according to a 2004 study the number of pedestrian crossings in Japan is 1,725,015. If we limit it to crossings with traffic signals, the number is 987,326. It may overtop a million by the present day.”

“Wow! No way!”

“In truth, I picked the numbers out of a hat.”

“Why lie at this juncture?!”

Just let me be impressed!

Now the rest of her credibility was gone too□not that it made sense to describe aberrations, or vampires, as credible.

“Credibility and Tempur-Pedic sound vaguely alike,” Shinobu said, resting the back of her blond head against me.

“Hmmm.” Girls really smell this good without even wearing perfume, I thought worthlessly, folding my arms in front of my chest. Given the little blond leaning against me, it’d be more accurate to say that I folded my arms in front of Shinobu’s chest. A neutral party would no doubt assume that I was hugging a little

girl. “Still, we have to select one of the pedestrian crossings in advance. I only have one body, after all.”

“If ye insist, I shall sunder thy body into pieces.”

“Why would I insist on that?!”

“I wonder if thou wouldst regenerate like a planarian. Should I smash thee to smithereens, we might end up with a hundred of thee.”

“I feel like Hachikuji once said something similar. Hang on, when I really think about it…” It wasn’t because I closed the map, nothing in particular prompted it, but I realized there was another possibility we needed to consider. “When I think about it, she didn’t necessarily take the shortest route from one place to the other. Taking later developments into account, she got totally lost, didn’t she?”

“Ahh, indeed,” Shinobu agreed. “In light of her transformation into an aberration, ’tis more likely that she failed to take the shortest route.”

“But if she went every which way, there’s no way for us to keep a lookout…”

We had to keep watch over every crosswalk in Japan, to exaggerate.

I glanced over at the sign with the residential map in the corner of the park.

On that day, that Mother’s Day, eleven years from now□

Hachikuji was looking at that map.

Alone.

All□alone.

“What do we do? And after we finally pinned down the locations of the Tsunade and Hachikuji homes thanks to Hanekawa.”

“Not thanks to the former class president’s loli-version, ’twas thine own doing. Thou shouldst hold thy head up high.”

“Yeah?”

“Aye. At the very least, ’twas certainly not with that intention that the girl pointed us in the direction of that police box…” Hm, Shinobu hummed with a satisfied and not particularly gruesome smile. “I have hit upon a scheme.”

“Scheme.”

“Aye. I am Secret Schemer Shinobu. A dream collaboration.”

“Since the eras actually overlap in your case, it’s more like plagiarism than a collaboration.”

I mean, first do something about the harsh reality that, thanks to your secret stratagem, we’re stuck eleven years in the past.

Please, please, no more secrets.

Keep it open source, I’m begging you.

Of course, thanks to the stratagem we might be able to save Hachikuji, so I guess I couldn’t fault her there.

“Hearken to my words. We need not tarry at some pedestrian crossing. We have learned the location of the Hachikuji residence, so let us away there to lie in wait, whence we may tail the girl when she makes for the Tsunade residence.”

“Where’s the joke?!”

Her unexpectedly proper stratagem forced an absurd quip out of me. Because I had my arms folded, the accompanying gesture took the unconventional form of grinding my chin into the crown of Shinobu’s head.

“W-We need but tail her and, at every pe-pedestrian crossing gird our loins for action. Thus may we prevent her from falling victim…” It seemed as though Shinobu liked what was happening

to her head and she made no move to stop me, going all limp as she continued her explanation. “’Tis a matter of course that tailing a girl of such tender years will appear most suspect to outside eyes, but… here, eleven years in the past, such eccentricities are still somewhat tolerated.”

“Hmm…”

Eccentricities indeed.

Well, eccentric as it may be—it was an excellent plan.

“If thou wishest to ensure that lost lass’s safety with more certainty, we might also set upon her with all our might as she exits the home, and in some way or other instill in her a fear so great that she shuts herself inside, there to remain for the entire day.”

“What do you mean, ‘some way or other’?”

Set upon her?

Trapping an elementary school girl in her home was a level of eccentricity that got you arrested, even eleven years ago.

Probably by that policewoman from earlier.

“But if it comes down to it, that plan isn’t off the table, Shinobu.”

“Not off the table?”

“Well, if it comes down to it. If it does, I’m prepared to be branded a criminal. But that’s going too far, or rather, it’s fundamentally pointless. We’re not just trying to prevent a traffic accident—I want to get Hachikuji to the Tsunade place alive so she can see her mother.”

She wanted to see her mother.

That was Hachikuji’s wish.

The reason she wandered lost for over ten years.

“I don’t know how long that policewoman has been stationed there,” I continued, “but at least as far as she could tell me, Mrs. Tsunade’s only daughter doesn’t seem to have been in an accident in the past couple of years—so this Mother’s Day, eleven years ago, must be the day Hachikuji dies. So after all, that is why I’ve come to this time. If Hachikuji can just see her mother tomorrow, then, with no regrets—even if the traffic accident happens later on, she’d meet her fate with no regrets, and without becoming lost.”

On the other hand, preventing the accident in a way where she doesn’t get to see her mother—probably would mean Hachikuji still getting lost upon dying.

Death itself couldn’t be averted.

If that fate was unshakeable, if it was history—then there was nothing to do but accept it.

However.

What I wanted to avert was the subsequent decade.

“Aye, if we can do this, her transformation into an aberration may at the very least be avoided. So there is nothing for it but to enact Operation Stalker.”

“Change the operation’s name right now.”

“Operation Sneakers, then.”

“Sneakers? Why the hell?”

“Because the etymology of ‘sneaker’ is one with that of ‘sneaking.’ I have heard it said that they were dubbed ‘sneakers’ because one might walk in them without making a sound.”

“I didn’t realize the word was so dodgy…”

I looked down at my feet.

I was definitely wearing sneakers.

No good, I couldn't look directly at them anymore now that they seemed like shoes from a criminal specialty store.

They didn't suit me at all!

"All right," I suggested, "let's get to sleep early tonight, and tomorrow we'll wait in front of the Hachikuji place starting in the morning. I wonder if there are any telephone poles or anything that we can hide behind."

"Aye, there will likely be a telephone pole or some such. Though there be no base station." But hearken, said Shinobu□her tone of voice didn't really change, but even without the contradictory conjunction, I'd have guessed that she was about to say something negative. She just had that air about her. "Dost thou understand, my lord?"

"Hm? Understand what? If you're talking about the repose I derive from embracing you, then yes, I understand it perfectly well. And for that I'm grateful."

"For that, ye need not be grateful."

Not every single time, chastized Shinobu.

"Rather, what it will mean if thou savest that lost lass."

"Huh? What it will mean? Haven't we already beaten that discussion to death? Enough already. You said a time paradox won't occur□"

"I speak not of time paradoxes and the like□"

If Mayoi Hachikuji doesn't become an aberration.

If she doesn't become a Lost Cow. If she doesn't lose her way.

"Eleven years from now, thou shalt not meet the lass, true?"

"…"

"Thou shalt not meet her on that Mother's Day, and thy enjoyable

chats, all the idle banter, it shall all be gone. Dost thou properly understand that?”

Of course.

That much I understood.

012

That night, we hoped to camp out in the ruined cram school like Oshino, but the plan went wildly off track.

I mean, it should have been obvious.

Here, eleven years in the past□the ruined cram school wasn't a ruined cram school. In fact□I believe it was formally known as Eikow Cram School□the place didn't even exist yet.

When we arrived at where it should have been, all that was there was a grove of trees.

A grove!

"Yikes… If we sleep among these trees, we'll get eaten alive by bugs… If we're not careful, we might even get attacked by wild dogs or something."

"If the building be not here, let us abandon the plan of staying here altogether."

Why are you only stubborn about this sort of thing? quipped Shinobu.

A sensible quip.

"But it feels kind of odd," I said. "I take that abandoned building's presence for granted, and this is going to sound strange, but I've also grown fond of it. It'd be one thing for it to revert to being new, but not even having been built yet…"

In other words, I didn't know when, but sometime later on, that four-story building was going to be constructed; who-knows-how-many children would pass through its classrooms; eventually, it would close after suffering financial difficulties□that whole future

lay ahead of it.

Though it was impossible to predict such a future from the grove.

I muttered, “So the place going under is already woven into the fabric of destiny? That’s…”

“All things and all people have a past, a yesteryear. Because of which they have a present, which continues on into the future. Is that not so? ’Tis no different for thee, nor for me.”

“Okay, in that case, what do we do? Me, I’m so delicate I can’t sleep in an unfamiliar place where I don’t feel comfortable. I’m the type who can’t even sleep with a new pillow.”

“We have no pillows to begin with.”

“Well, I was hoping to use your lap as my pillow.”

“If that is thy desire, I shall not deny thee…”

Deny me, please.

Joking around with this little girl was pretty tricky.

“But why consider sleeping in a grove at all if thou be such a delicate fellow?”

“Why indeed.”

“’Tis less delicate than delete key.”

“Woof, painful.”

Anyway.

This place was already not the place I knew□or rather.

It wasn’t yet the place I knew.

So to speak.

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” I declared. “If worst comes to worst, we

can stay up all night. To tell the truth, I'm not feeling all that sleepy."

My vampiric constitution.

At the moment, my biorhythm was on normal mode, or more like easy mode, so my vampiric nature was at a low ebb. You could say that, physically, I was like a normal human. Still, my recovery and healing parameters were maintaining decent levels.

Thus I didn't really need to sleep for "rest"—my progress in studying for exams was, of course, due first and foremost to Hanekawa and Senjogahara's guidance, but also, I was simply in the enviable position of being able to use some of my sleep time as study time.

When I thought about it that way, I felt kind of guilty towards the other examinees, almost like I was doping, but—there were concomitant risks, so let's let that one go.

"I was thinking we'd go early tomorrow morning," I told Shinobu, "but why don't we go check out the place tonight."

"The Hachikuji residence?"

"Where else?"

"I thought perhaps 'twas Mister Donut's location ye intended to confirm."

"Quite a self-serving delusion to be having…"

Wait.

In this era when even the cram school wasn't yet a sparkle in the architect's eye, was the local Mr. D up and running?

"By the way, Shinobu, are you not feeling sleepy?"

"Nighttime is my time."

"It is, isn't it. But does that mean you'll be tired during the day tomorrow?"

“An interesting question. Nay, for me, sleep has a strong recreational element. I can remain awake if I tried.”

“I see…”

If I tried was where things got dicey.

Shinobu, more capricious than anyone, might not even try.

If she stayed awake, it would certainly help me out□

“’Tis given to me to slumber within thy shadow, so I might store up on it tonight that I may perform great deeds tomorrow.”

“…”

She seemed somehow enthusiastic.

Not that I could get much of a read on her feelings.

“What? I have no feelings.”

And at that, Shinobu smiled.

Goes to show why she seemed so depraved when she smiled.

“’Tis just that I feel somewhat high, somehow put in mind of spring break being alone with thee like this.”

“I see…”

Well, yeah.

Because Shinobu needed to hide in my shadow, it felt like we spent a lot of time with each other, but being alone together□the feeling of being alone together, was nostalgic for me too.

There were my interactions with Hanekawa and Senjogahara, of course, and various other students at school, and when I got home there were my little sisters and my parents.

However unsociable a guy I may be□I never really found myself alone, at least in a physical sense.

So it was never just the two of us.

Huh.

Spring break.

I repeatedly used “hell” as a metaphor to describe those two weeks, but□but that hell wasn’t necessarily all bad.

Right.

The real reason I can’t recall that vacation without bitterness and abundant regret□even though it was so hellish.

Even so□there were happy memories.

Mixed in there as well.

Unhappiness can’t be transformed into happiness.

But in addition to unhappiness□there was also happiness.

Not as two sides of the same coin□separately.

“Shinobu.”

“Aye.”

“Wanna kiss?”

“Why?! And whence thy middle-school-girlish invitation?!”

Shinobu opened her eyes wide.

Her golden eyes.

“Why not? You’re the one who was inviting me earlier.”

“’Twas a joke! If we did so and it came to light, Miss Tsundere or someone would slaughter me!! Canst thou have forgotten that at present I am in essence a little girl?!”

“Yeah, but, you can beat Black Hanekawa.”

“’Twas because my opponent was an aberration.”

“Hunh.”

It was hard to wrap my mind around that power balance.

Weaker than a human, but stronger than an aberration?

Like rock paper scissors?

Well, I guess it was the same among humans.

“Huh, so we won’t kiss.”

“We shan’t.”

Were we to, ’twould be a hundred years hence, Shinobu footnoted.

Going to take a lot of patience.

That was one hell of a come on.

“I really don’t get your criteria… It’s no good if there are feelings involved? In that case, you should know that just now I meant it in an Americanized way, not an erotic way.”

“Shush. Nothing ever erotic about a kiss,” Shinobu responded with surprising innocence.

Hmmmm.

Probably a feint.

“Anyway, let’s get going. Best find someplace near Hachikuji’s home to bed down.”

“Indeed.”

“Worst-case scenario, we’ll negotiate with the Hachikujis and ask if we could stay over.”

“Even I know how foolish that notion is.”

So we set out for the Hachikuji residence.

With the map drawn for us by the policewoman to rely on—we didn't get lost.

Unlike on that Mother's Day eleven years later, we didn't get lost.

Mother's Day—that day when I first met Hachikuji.

If my attempt succeeded, that day would never arrive.

How that would be corrected for, how the ends would be made to meet, I had no idea…but my encounter with Hachikuji, and friendship, would all never have happened.

That was fine.

That was good.

Because aberrations were what "never existed" to begin with—and what was weird was that they ever existed.

"Hey, Shinobu. Can I just make sure of something? Something we were talking about earlier. If I succeed in saving Hachikuji, will I completely forget about her afterwards?"

"I know not."

"Know not? How irresponsible of you."

"I have no responsibility in this," Shinobu stated. She had some nerve, the little girl. "Cease thy constant questioning of me. This time slip is my first as well."

"Time slip…"

A queer new expression.

Or rather, it was way out-of-date.

"All things considered, 'twould be unnatural to retain memories of a girl you never even met."

“Yeah, you told me a time paradox absolutely wouldn’t occur, but what about it? If I forget about Hachikuji, then I won’t decide to save her—which means I can’t save her?” A theoretical loop kept spiraling in my head, but that was how it seemed to me—and if so, wouldn’t everything I was about to do be a wasted effort?

“If a time paradox cannot occur no matter what, then no matter what efforts thou makest, wasted or proper, perhaps thou cannot save the lost lass,” Shinobu said, clinging onto the back of my neck (like a koala, though I didn’t mention it before. She seemed to be taking a liking to the position). “I remained silent so as not to dampen thine ardor, but if the wheels of fate are already in motion, then so shall it be—because the lost lass of this time is a human, not an aberration. No matter how valiant thine attempt to save her, even if thou assayest to escort her to her mother’s door, some sort of obstacle shall arise to thwart thy aim. Or so it seems to me.”

“Got it.”

“Mm? What?”

“Nothing, I just came to a decision, that’s all—I mean, if that’s how it has to be,” I said, “we’ll just have to trigger a time paradox.”

If nothing or no one exists that doesn’t change.

Then it was fate’s turn to change.

013

The Hachikuji residence was a ready-built single-family home, with no particular characteristics distinguishing it as the target of our search—but Hachikuji isn't exactly a common surname, so it seemed unlikely to be the home of a different family with the same name.

It was already the middle of the night by the time we arrived there (for all my big talk, I ended up getting lost on the way), and the residential neighborhood had already fallen under a blanket of silence.

There were virtually no lights to be seen in the windows.

Only the streetlights were burning brightly.

"I was hoping for a sighting of Hachikuji herself tonight, but I think we're too late for that."

"Mmm. From the darkened lamps, I would hazard that indeed both the lost lass and her father have taken to bed. That is, 'tis safe to assume they are but two?"

"Yeah. I don't think she has any brothers or sisters, and I never heard any talk of her father remarrying… Maybe I just didn't hear about it, but if he had, I think I'd know." It wouldn't jibe. There was also, of course, the possibility that her grandparents lived with them—but if they did, it wouldn't be such a big deal. "I'm pretty sure it's just the two of them. And even if, worst-case scenario, her father remarried and his new spouse has a child of her own, and even if that child is a girl and about the same age as Hachikuji—there's no way I'd mistake anyone else for her."

"Even had they the semblance of twins?"

"That's…"

“’Tis likely I am overthinking it. However, in the worst-case scenario, or the even-worse-worst-case scenario, we lose nothing by being vigilant against any and all possibilities.”

For we know not what obstacles may arise to hinder us, Shinobu warned.

She herself probably didn’t believe we’d have to thread the needle like that, but she couldn’t help dispensing her advice.

She who, like the threading of a needle.

Miraculously even.

Ended up in her current state.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s spend the night considering the possibilities, then let’s turn our minds to tackling every contingency. What time is it, Shinobu?”

“Let me see.” Shinobu looked at the watch on her right wrist. It was a men’s watch and didn’t suit her slim wrist at all. It looked more like a bracelet. “’Tis eleven. PM.”

“Hmm.”

“The hour when the 7-Elevens of this age close their doors, is it not?”

“We haven’t gone that far back.”

“By the by, my lord. Most people believe that, as I have just intimated, 7-Eleven originally opened its doors at seven in the morning and closed them at eleven at night, hence the name. But didst thou know ’twas in truth a later addition?”

“Huh?”

“In truth, the name derived from a soccer team formed by the store’s founders. And so the ‘seven’ was spelt differently for the five years following upon its inception.”

“Wow, really?”

I had no idea!

No shit, from their soccer team!

Then then then then, what was the other spelling?!

“Well, ’tis a fib.”

“Why tell such a lie?!”

“I wondered if I might fool thee.”

“Don’t fool me just as an experiment!”

Anyway, apparently it was eleven o’clock.

Why the hell did it take a whole page just to find out the time?! It’s thanks to this kinda stuff that Hanekawa is threatening my position as narrator.

Let’s just try to get through this without incident.

“‘Without incident’ sounds as though it ought to mean ‘on purpose,’” commented Shinobu. “‘Incidentally’ may carry the meaning of ‘by chance,’ after all.”

“Stop reacting to every single word already. At this rate, we’ll never get this conversation over with, no matter how many pages we fill. Let’s see, we can’t just stand here all night.”

There was a telephone pole.

A most suitable telephone pole.

Such an ideal telephone pole that I wondered whether it might be a god (The joke is that the counter for gods is one pole, two poles, and so on. I figured I’d try out some new material, but on top of being hard to pick up on, it’s kind of a dud, and maybe even ill-advised).

But there was no way we were going to make camp here all night.

Given the surroundings, one night didn't seem like it'd be a problem, but this quiet, pitch-dark residential neighborhood didn't seem well-suited to a stakeout—I could feel it in my bones.

If only it had a more motley feel to it.

Yeah, a more motley feel—the kind that might draw out yokai.

"Right," I said, "let's try to find somewhere to sleep like we planned."

I decided to check the nameplate on the house one more time, just to be sure—approach the door, make sure it says Hachikuji, and then get away from there.

While still carrying Shinobu.

Wait, if I'd been carrying her all along, shouldn't she be weighing me down?

"Yet," I muttered, "the sensation of those ribs rubbing against my chest eases the burden…"

"Art thou aware that thy innermost feelings, beyond the pale of humanity, are flowing untrammeled?"

"With little girls, it's all about the collarbone and ribcage. Oops, oops. That's definitely not a line you can voice these days."

"Nor in the Edo period."

"Wasn't that era tolerant of loli, though? The marrying age was insanely low, and they were even tolerant of shota, weren't they? 'Pageboys' or whatever."

"Well, if truth be told…" Shinobu nodded meekly. "Each age hath its own mores."

"It'd be best if we could find a nice big park like that one with the unpronounceable name—so we could spend the night without inconveniencing anyone, or rather making anyone uncomfortable."

“Mmm. I submit that sleeping in a ditch by the side of the road would be most vampire coffin-like. However, art thou implying that ’twould be a shame to disturb the paperboy or anyone who happened upon us in the morning?”

“…Yeah, something like that.”

Shinobu, I’m personally delighted that you’re finally showing some comprehension of the subtleties of human society, but sleeping in a ditch by the side of the road is very much not human…

It is, quite literally, a niche idea.

Unfortunately there was no such park near the Hachikuji residence, or if there was, we didn’t know the lay of the land well enough to find it (if only I’d anticipated this and asked the policewoman). By the time we finally discovered a park that met our needs, it was well past midnight.

In other words, the big day.

Mother’s Day.

“Now ’tis time for Shinobu’s Trivia Corner. Didst thou know that Father’s Day actually predated Mother’s Day?”

“Bullshit.”

“Drat, was it so obvious?”

Well, the whole process may have taken longer than necessary thanks to this kind of back and forth (Shinobu’s False Trivia Corner), but we may not actually have been that far from the Hachikuji residence.

If only I could use the GPS function on my cell phone, I could confirm our current location… We talk about how much better things were in the past, but actually having traveled back eleven years, a lot of things were way more inconvenient.

The past wasn’t all that great. Right.

At the same time, it definitely wasn't all bad.

That's to say, the park (which had an easy-to-read name, unlike the other one) had a ton of playground equipment—which took me back, most of them having been removed all across the country in the present.

Wow, the spinny guy!

Actually, now that you mention it, it does seem pretty dangerous…

"Sweet! I'm so pumped. Shinobu, let's see who can kick our shoes off farthest from the swings."

"Is it not thanks to such tomfoolery that they have been removed from across the land?"

A high school senior frolicking on the playground, admonished by, to all appearances, an eight-year-old girl.

Well, I'd get reported for playing in the park in the middle of the night, most likely, so even if Shinobu had been into it, it was probably best to give it up.

"Aw, but c'mon," I groaned, "I wanna do back hip circles and stuff. I haven't done them since grade school. I wonder if the horizontal bar still tastes like blood if you lick it."

"The taste of blood?" Shinobu's eyes lit up. It seemed my words had tugged at her vampiric heartstrings; you never knew what grabbed her attention. "I see, blood, because of the iron content… If such be the case, then in lean times I might chomp on some iron to survive."

"What a grim stopgap…"

Plain old water would be more like blood.

Probably.

Anyway, we weren't foolish enough to lose ourselves in play, of course—but the fact that it had all that playground equipment did

turn out to be our saving grace.

We were able to spend the night lying in one of those structures modeled on a drainpipe, which at least provided us with a roof and walls.

“’Tis most narrow, though. Like sardines in a tin. I cannot discern if I am to be thy futon, or ’tother way round.”

“Neither, actually. If it’s too narrow, then why don’t you just go back into my shadow?”

“Be not so heartless. Allow me to feel thy ribcage in return.”

“…”

Dunno.

Well, from Shinobu’s 600-year-old perspective, at eighteen I must still be well within shota territory.

My collarbone and ribcage were in peril.

Someone’s after me!

Etc.

I set the alarm on my cell phone for the morning (since the clock was adjusted to the present, I had to factor that into my calculations) and went to sleep.

I felt bad turning Shinobu’s nocturnal vampire lifestyle upside down, but I also wanted her companionship during the coming day.

014

“How can I sleep!”

With that sudden shout, I opened my eyes.

It was thirty minutes before my alarm was supposed to go off.

Shinobu’s body rose in tandem with mine, that is, in surprise.

“Wh-What, my lord… What hath transpired?”

“Nothing, sorry.”

My back hurt so much that I’d quipped out loud upon waking up.

It had been unimaginably sentimental of me to be so glad that the playground equipment had yet to be removed. My joints hadn’t ached this much even when I’d slept all in a heap with Sengoku and Kanbaru in the ruins of the abandoned cram school.

Over spring break I was a genuine vampire and didn’t pay it any mind, but…man, Oshino was really something. Then again, lead a vagabond lifestyle for long enough, and you probably got used to a bed this hard.

Still, choosing a drainpipe as a bed had been a huge blunder. Sure, there was the fact that it was hard, but more than that, more than anything, the goddamn surface was curved.

I guess I was enamored of drainpipes in the first place because they appear so much in Doraemon, in which case this was all Doraemon’s fault in a roundabout sort of way.

Dammit, Doraemon.

“Are you okay, Nobu-chan?” I asked.

“Though Nobu-chan be likely a variation on Nobuemon, ’tis like a regular Japanese kid’s name. And its ring is rather like unto Nobi-chan.”

“So, are you okay or not?”

Aye, I am fine, replied Shinobu.

Hmm, even having lost most of her vampire nature, she was still one at heart, and I suppose she could cope with this harsh of an environment and then some.

“’Tis not so. I managed not a wink of sleep.”

“Huh? Why? Couldn’t trade night for day?”

“’Tis not that. Thou wert clutching me as though thy sleep was troubled, so I in turn could not slumber.”

“…”

Had I really used her like a body pillow? Or like a futon?

“Thou wert playing my ribs like a güiro in thy sleep and calling out, Hanekawaaa, Hanekawaaa, Loli Hanekawaaa.”

“Liar!” Please, not like a güiro!

“I thought perhaps that coming to this past might have made thee forlorn, so nothing for it but to indulge thee.”

“You liarrrrr!”

If it’s true, I could never face you, or Hanekawa, or Senjogahara again!

I’d be the absolute worst character, I needed to die tomorrow!

“Heh, but for today at least, I’ve got to live,” I exhorted myself. “Because on this Mother’s Day, I must save Hachikuji.”

“Thou art trying to pass this off as a gag with thy cool-seeming utterance. But ’tis no laughing matter, thy handprint remains

clearly visible upon my ribs. Here, see for thyself."

"What a shame, it's a novel, so I can't."

"Simply add an illustration."

"What, of a little girl lifting up her dress to show what's underneath?"

"In the style of the iPad version of Alice in Wonderland."

"Interactive, you mean?"

"The reader may lift up my dress with but a touch."

"Yikes… Well, switching gears, shall we head to the Hachikuji residence? We can skip breakfast. If you're willing to put up with that, I'll treat you to Mister Donut when we get back to the present."

"No, ye may not switch gears just as ye please. Dost thou think that the mere mention of Mr. D allows thee to gloss over anything and everything? Thou art already committed to treating me in recompense for the time warp I have wrought for thee."

"Urk."

"If ye wish to make this handprint disappear, ye must needs treat me to Café Andonand."

"Why do you know about Mister Donut's luxury franchise…"

Who told her?

There's nothing like that in my town, nor was there ever, nor will there ever be.

"That handprint will vanish in a heartbeat, it won't prove anything," I sneered.

"Then I shall just have to prove it by taking a selfie with thy phone."

“Forget about proving anything, if a pic like that ends up on my phone, Hanekawa will cut all ties with me and Senjogahara will break up with me.”

“And thou shalt be apprehended by that policewoman.”

“I wonder if she’s still on the force in the present…” If so, then we might meet again on the other side. The ties that bind are inscrutable, after all. “Anyway, you’ve got to be the only vampire who goes around using words like selfie.”

“And that vampire’s ribs□”

“I apologize, I sincerely apologize, so please stop bringing it up!”

I had absolutely no recollection of the incident, but considering how difficult it was to sleep in that drainpipe, it seemed plausible that I would react to my nightmares that way. And so, mistrustful of myself, I ended up begging wholeheartedly for forgiveness.

“Well, I have no intention to avenge myself on thee, given thy promise to treat me to hordes of donuts, and that every day.”

Shinobu certainly looked pleased with herself.

Which gave me the sense that I’d been cleverly set up.

She could even have made the handprint herself.

“Fine,” I assented. “I’ll content myself with the lingering possibility that I enjoyed your ribs to the fullest.”

“My, but aren’t ye a positive lad…”

We crawled out of the pipe.

The weather was clear, same as yesterday.

And by yesterday, I mean the yesterday of eleven years ago.

I had kind of hoped it would rain, since that would ease the difficulty of tailing Hachikuji (rain hides sounds and figures alike,

and umbrellas make you neglect your rear), but things didn't go my way.

Well, Hachikuji hadn't said anything about it raining that day, anyway.

Shinobu and I did some light stretches in the park to loosen up our tense muscles (I don't know if she actually needed to stretch, but she did it along with me anyway), and we headed for the Hachikuji place.

It was 8 a.m., local time.

Seemed like a good time.

Now, not that I'd thought about it even as I slept, but in executing our mission to hide ourselves behind a telephone pole and monitor the Hachikuji residence, the real question was just how highly suspicious we would seem.

However lenient the age, the longer our stakeout continued, the greater the likelihood that a good neighbor would say something to us.

Given that it was Sunday, our mark would probably leave the house sometime in the morning, but since this was Hachikuji we were dealing with, we couldn't be sure of anything.

She might leave at five in the afternoon, for all we knew.

She'd said that her backpack contained everything she needed for an overnight stay, and if so, it was perfectly plausible that her planned itinerary involved going there late and coming back early.

The girl was prone to let her imagination run wild and might be inexplicably worried about overstaying her welcome or something.

"What a total pain in the ass," I griped. "She can get lost."

"Is that not precisely what we endeavor to prevent?"

Our usual banter went on, but on that one point I readied a strict

countermeasure.

A countermeasure against being addressed by anyone from the neighborhood, that is, even should the stakeout continue for ten hours—it consisted of giving Shinobu blood.

Of letting her drink my blood.

Why would I do this, which was in a sense a time-honored custom of ours, even though we weren't preparing for battle? Because by letting her drink my blood, I could raise the level of her vampiric powers and allow her to modify her outward appearance.

Whether she actually transformed or not depended on her intentions and was completely up to her—but for that very reason, I hoped she'd change out of her little girl form.

If she was currently an eight-year-old elementary school student.

Then into a thirteen-year-old middle schooler, at least.

Actually, becoming a full adult would best suit our goals, but if she got too close to her "original form," both of us would become susceptible to the sun's rays.

Our bodies would be reduced to ash.

Or at least badly burned.

I had to retain a trace of humanity.

The part that thrives under the sun.

"And what meaning is there in my becoming a middle schooler?" asked Shinobu. "I'll let thee know right now that, in the view of the world, fraternizing with a girl in junior high is enough, more than enough, to constitute a Lolita Complex."

"That's not the point."

Sure, a high school third-year dating a middle school first-year would probably be treated like a pariah, and in that sense, Shinobu

was absolutely right□but nah, I ain't even talkin' about that, okay?

Not entertainin' myself with the many ages of Shinobu or nothin'.

I asked her, "Do you remember those middle school girls from yesterday?"

"I have forgotten."

"Well, remember!"

"Oh, them? I see, I understand thine intended artifice."

"Ho ho, mighty perceptive, Shinobu."

Positive that she understood exactly nothing, I enticed her to spell it out. We were both getting a little too into it.

"Through thy conversation with them, though hast discovered the fascination of middle school girls."

"No, I'm telling you, that's not it at all!"

"Upon our return to the present, will the first stop be the dwelling of Miss Bangs? Nay, such is unnecessary, for in thine own home there are already two middle-school little-sister character kits."

"Don't count my sisters in kits."

I mean, Sengoku was one thing, but the object of your fascination being the little-sister character was something else.

"Sengoku is one thing, is she?"

"Mm? Ah, well, she's in her second year of middle school. And lately she seems strangely grown up, you know?"

"Then that one's actions have unexpectedly begun to bear fruit…"

"Who do you mean, 'that one'? Sounds like some final boss… Kaiki?"

"Nay, pay me no heed. I do not wish to speak of it. Now, if what

thou sayest is true, where is the sense in my becoming a middle schooler? In making me recall that gaggle of girls?"

"Because, obviously someone's much more likely to say something if I've got a little girl like you with me. By all means, I want you with me on this stakeout. Which is why ingenious young Mr. Koyomi over here had this idea: If you're fed enough blood to grow into a middle schooler, you'll become more pretty than cute and exude an unapproachable nobility. An air about you will make anyone think twice about addressing you, a bewitching beauty who could steal anyone's heart."

"…"

Huh?

I was just stating the obvious, so why was middle-school Shinobu blushing?

What's up, are you not feeling well?

Seems that with the return of your vampiric nature, the sun really does become your enemy.

I thought there'd be no problem with five or so years of growth…

"Are you okay?"

"Mm? Mmm? O-Oh, aye, all is well. W-Well then, go on with whatever ye were saying. Ye may praise me more, more, moarrr."

"Huh? I wasn't praising you, but… See, I'm saying, if you're a little girl and we're together, someone is more likely to bother us, but if you're a middle schooler and we're together, they'll keep their distance. We'll still be suspicious, but I think it'll be harder for anyone to approach us, that's all."

"Harder for them to approach? Why, why?"

"Well, because you're too pretty…"

"Wh-What specifically about me?"

“Hm? I mean, it’s not anything in specific, it’s everything. From your bouncy golden hair to your smooth skin, the shape of your eyes, your lips, and of course your figure, perfect even with its traces of immaturity, not to mention the immaculate proportions of your arms and legs. There’s no question that if Leonardo da Vinci were alive today, he’d paint your portrait in place of the Mona Lisa.”

“Stahp!”

She kicked me.

She kicked me with her vampire power.

I’d gone vampire too, so it should have balanced out and not hurt much□you’d think, but in fact I sustained enough damage to end up flat on my back staring at the sky.

She didn’t hold anything back with that kick.

What the hell, was she mad or something?

“Um, did I say something wrong?”

“Thou didst not, thou didst not. Not a single thing. Well now well now, if thou so sayeth, I shall hold nothing back in cooperating with thee, that I might enhance thy might.”

When she stood up, I saw that middle-school Shinobu’s clothes had changed from the standard model□when she got this much power back, she could tamper with reality as she saw fit, at least on the level of clothing.

And this time, her new outfit.

Clearly the uniform of the middle schoolers we met yesterday.

A dress, just like Sengoku’s, which is to say the uniform of the middle school I’d attended.

Wow, a super rare card!

Uniform Shinobu…

“This way we will be less likely to be addressed,” she explained. “And what is more, a uniform is enough to vouchsafe a person’s character in this country.”

“Y-Yeah. For sure.”

It wasn’t like that hadn’t occurred to me.

But I never imagined Shinobu, as particular about style as the Super-Popular Class President, would wear something like a school uniform, which so many other people also wore, so the plan had been left on the cutting-room floor.

For Shinobu to go this far in displaying a cooperative attitude all on her own… I hadn’t even tempted her with Mister Donut, so what on earth could have put her in such a good mood?

I had no clue.

It was a puzzle, a mystery.

If only I could figure it out—it’d be massively advantageous in my future interactions with her.

“If ye wish, I can ready a uniform for thee as well.”

“Okay, yeah, maybe you should.”

I decided to presume upon her good will.

Though it did make me slightly uncomfortable to think that eleven years ago, too, simply wearing a uniform made you less suspicious in this country.

Shinobu created a Naoetsu High uniform (male) for me, and I re-entered the drainpipe to change into it—thus completing our transformation into a completely and thoroughly unsuspicious male prep-school student and female middle-school exchange student.

Incidentally, while I was changing, Shinobu further altered her style

so that she had glasses and braids, for some reason basing it on Hanekawa's old look. Maybe because that was Shinobu's image of a diligent student.

I actually couldn't come up with a single good reason for a high schooler and middle schooler to be together, but on the off chance that someone said something to us, I figured we could skate by if we told them that she was doing a homestay at my family's house—and while we were concocting that far-fetched excuse, we arrived back at the Hachikuji residence.

Not that we worked out the stage directions or anything, but we sort of stood near the telephone pole and began our stakeout.

I'd picked up the book that Loli Hanekawa had chucked at me and then abandoned the day before, so while I made Shinobu read that (and look like a weirdly bookish girl)—while I pretended to fool around with my cell phone (its kind didn't exist yet, but by virtue of that, I must've looked like a high schooler playing a video game)—

We waited for Hachikuji to come out of her house.

Mayoi Hachikuji—with her huge backpack, on her way to her mother's, heart surely full of anxiety and anticipation.

I presumed she would indeed leave while it was still morning—so our stakeout wouldn't last all that long.

I likely wouldn't even have to wait half an hour—

To meet her.

The living, breathing Mayoi Hachikuji.

015

“What the hell’s taking her so long?!” I shouted, a little after 11 a.m. I almost slammed my cell phone to the ground in frustration—even though I’d just gotten the model. “She really had my hopes up!”

“Thou art most ill-suited to stakeouts—only a paltry few hours have passed.”

“Sure… And true, I intended to stake this place out for ten hours if it came to that, but I still thought she’d leave during the morning… judging from the way she’d talked about it.”

As we’d hoped, no one addressed the uniformed me/middle-school Shinobu combo—there was no getting around the fact that Shinobu stood out, being a beautiful blond girl and all. Passersby kept glancing at us, but no one actually stopped and stared.

Unexpectedly, Shinobu’s braids seemed to be doing the trick.

Even a glimpse of blond braids is unusual.

Though personally, I’d been ready to be accosted by strangers.

The sun proved harsh since we’d both raised our vampiric levels to allow Shinobu to disguise (transform?) herself, and while it was only May, it felt like we were trapped in a sauna.

Shinobu retained her composure, but it must have been hard on her.

I felt bad and somewhat regretted my overly optimistic prognosis and forcing a disguise on her, but it was too late for that now.

Our forebears tell us: it’s better to regret doing something than to regret not doing it. But when you really think about it, that seems

like an incredibly irresponsible thing to say. Shouldn't it be: don't do anything you would regret in the first place?

Anyway, at this point it was just a test of will.

A contest, opposite Mayoi Hachikuji.

I will stay planted here right through tomorrow if I have to□

"Excuse me, you two."

Just as I renewed my determination, someone spoke. To us.

It was a total surprise attack, and having already decided we were in the clear for the day, I couldn't have been more startled.

"Er, ah, yes?" I responded, barely keeping it together.

Feigning innocence with all my might.

As we'd worked out in advance, Shinobu, acting like an exchange student who didn't understand Japanese very well, just kept on reading her book.

In retrospect, it was a self-contradictory ploy given that the book was in Japanese (a translation of On the Banks of Plum Creek, to be precise).

"Oh my, what can I do for you? Do you have some business with us not-at-all suspicious people?" I responded nonchalantly.

Enunciating more than was necessary.

What was I, a stage actor?

"You would like me to expound on our lack of suspiciousness? By all means, permit me to explain. Naturally, we are not vampires or anything of the sort. We simply perspire easily."

"Um…I don't care."

Seeming truly discombobulated□like he was actually going to pieces.

The grown man standing in front of me asked:

“Have you seen the girl who lives here?”

Almost as though he hadn’t noticed how suspicious Shinobu and I were.

“A fifth grader…with pigtails, probably carrying a large backpack…”

“…!”

I’d only looked away for a second, but when I returned my gaze to the Hachikuji residence—the front door and the main gate were wide open.

Like someone had rushed out.

No, forget such vague language, this was no time to play the sage and examine every possibility. It was obvious that this guy was the one who’d rushed out.

This guy—was a Hachikuji.

And.

The fifth grader he was searching for had to be Mayoi Hachikuji.

“Uh…no, I haven’t seen her.”

I was just about as agitated as he was, but at least keeping it together enough not to let it show, I dealt with the situation as coolly as I could.

I say keeping it together.

But I wasn’t even lying—I hadn’t seen her.

Though I’d been there watching forever.

“Has something happened to the girl?”

“Sh-She’s my daughter,” the guy answered, looking back at his

house. “It seems she’s run away… I thought she was just taking her sweet time to get up, but when I went to her room to check on her, there was a note, and according to it, she left the house around five in the morning.”

“Hachikujiiiii!” I unintentionally blurted out her name.

The guy was startled, probably thinking that I meant him—Mr. Hachikuji. But I couldn’t give a shit about his reaction.

“Where the hell does she think she’s going?!”

Leaving at five in the morning.

She going fishing or something?!

Not considerate in the least!

She felt quite fine overstaying her welcome!

Mayoi Hachikuji.

Even when she was alive, she was an unpredictable girl.

016

First off, I told Mr. Hachikuji to calm down. Respectfully. He probably didn't appreciate that coming from some unknown high school kid like me, but I couldn't just abandon a guy who was so discombobulated that he was clinging to that selfsame unknown high school kid. For him to ask the first people that he saw (us) where his daughter had gone, even though he couldn't have known that we'd been watching his house since before nine that morning, could only mean that he was completely beside himself. To the point that one false move might lead to some sort of incident.

I suggested that perhaps he should try phoning his daughter's friends and asking them if they knew where she was.

It was a pointless suggestion, of course.

But there was no way I could say, I'm fairly certain she's headed to your ex-wife's house, so why not try contacting her?

I couldn't afford to arouse his suspicions.

Needless to say, it wouldn't have been all that strange to arrive at the notion that, it being Mother's Day and all, maybe she'd gone to see her mother, but all the same…

"G-Good idea… Thanks," said Mr. Hachikuji, returning to the house.

Leaving the outside gate, if not the front door, wide open.

I watched him go inside□then started running.

At top speed, with Shinobu clutched under my arm.

"Dammit! We should have spent the whole night hidden behind that telephone pole, no matter how suspicious we'd seem!"

“Nay, methinks this be what ye might call the compulsion of history. However much I may have tried thy patience with my prattle, I too thought we might put off the lass’s demise until the morrow, but like as not she is fated to be struck by a car and to die on this day, come what may.”

Clutched under my arm, Shinobu had transformed back into her little girl form without my noticing—seemingly for ease of portability. Noticing this, I transferred her from under my arm to a standard piggyback position.

And I bent double.

To minimize air resistance.

Because I was in vampire mode, my overall physical strength was enhanced—this wasn’t what I’d had in mind when I bolstered myself, of course, but I suppose you could call it a side benefit.

As I was, I could run a 100-meter dash in under five seconds.

However…

I was aware that, even so, I couldn’t catch up to Hachikuji if she’d left the house six hours ago—it wasn’t even an hour on foot from the Hachikuji place to the Tsunade place.

Even if they were a child’s feet—we were too late.

It was exceedingly likely that the accident had already occurred.

We were too late.

Unless we could have that time back again—

“Fate, my ass! I refuse to accept such a fate!”

“Let me warn thee now, my lord. Leave off with thy video game-generation thinking that if thou hast failed, thou canst but turn back time and try once again. If ye insist, I could accomplish it for thee. But were the motion to go awry once more, we might yet time slip to, if not the utter catastrophe of five hundred million years

ago, then the age of the dinosaurs, never to return."

"I get it already…"

I wasn't so selfish as to think that I would get umpteen chances at this.

It was a one-time miracle.

Not a bonus game, just a glitch.

No way to reproduce it.

"Shiiiit!"

Which is why, even though I understood that it was clearly too late, I continued running with all my might, never slackening my pace.

Along the way, I thought about Hachikuji's father.

Her father.

The kind of father who, after the divorce, kept Hachikuji from seeing her mother in spite of the law, never speaking a word about her mother inside the house who tried to make Hachikuji forget about her mother completely.

What can I say, from hearing those stories I had constructed an image of him as some kind of vile demonic fiend, but it didn't jibe at all with the man I'd met who was so shaken up by his daughter "running away from home."

Regular.

He was just a regular father.

Huh.

So that was a father.

A father could get so concerned when it came to his daughter, appearances be damned?

It was really something.

Between the two, my sympathies had lain entirely with the mother, Mrs. Tsunade, and I had viewed Mr. Hachikuji as the enemy who was trying to tear Hachikuji and her mother apart—but now.

Now, for his sake too.

I wanted to save Hachikuji's life.

I wanted to prolong the time he had with his daughter for a couple of days, or just a day—a few minutes, even.

"My lord!"

If Shinobu hadn't wrung my neck and cried out, I surely would have missed it.

At that particular moment I was starting to notice that if I regulated the angle of my turns just right, Shinobu's ribcage rubbed against my back in a pleasant way, like I was scratching an itch with a backscratcher.

Moving on—it was that park.

The park with the unpronounceable name.

In the course of running from the Hachikuji place to the Tsunade place, I was about to pass by the park without so much as a glance.

Wringing my neck from behind, and in so doing twisting my head to the right, Shinobu forcibly shifted my field of vision—

Allowing me to discover a lone young lady perusing a residential map installed in the corner of the park, a look of intense concentration on her face.

A lone young lady.

With pigtails, and a big backpack slung over her shoulders—somehow reminiscent of a snail.

Somehow brimming with a poignant air.

An adorable girl.

“……nkk!”

I tried to put on the brakes, but blew it.

And fell flat on my face.

Having run at an unthinkable speed for a human being, I went down as if I was the one hit by a car.

With her enhanced reflexes, Shinobu was able to jump clear before I fell, flipping through the air in a sort of moonsault and sticking the landing like it was all perfectly safe (it wasn’t safe at all). But I didn’t think that’s cold, or there must have been some way for you to stop me other than wringing my neck.

After all, I was in vampire mode, so any scrapes I got from falling over would heal in the blink of an eye.

“…Shinobu, over here.”

I kept my voice low—even though I didn’t think the lone young lady could hear us at that distance—and as discreetly as possible, I took Shinobu by the hand. Since there was no other place to hide nearby, we had to content ourselves with lurking behind a tree.

I was having a busy day, concealing myself behind trees and telephone poles.

“Shinobu, stick to me. She’ll see us.”

“Roger, ribs ribs ribs.” Making a mysterious frog-like sound, she cozied up to me and said, “Is it…indeed her? I halted thee reflexively, but to tell it true, I can barely distinguish one human from another. I made my judgment based solely upon the giant backpack she wears.”

“Well—it’s not the sort of backpack most girls carry.”

It was one of her trademarks.

Imagining myself as a ninja, I tried to confirm the girl's identity again from behind the tree, just to be on the safe side—it was quite some distance, but that was irrelevant.

My emotional attachment to Hachikuji was, in this instance, also irrelevant, as at the moment my vision was materially—or immaterially, absurdly enhanced, thanks to being in vampiric form.

At that moment, I could have distinguished the pattern on a little girl's shirt from a mile away.

"Must it be a little girl?" asked Shinobu.

"It was just meant to be an easy-to-understand example."

"What kind of person—nay, aberration—thou art is easy to understand, at least…"

Letting that go in one ear and out the other.

I confirmed that Hachikuji was indeed Hachikuji.

"…"

Maybe this goes without saying, but—she looked exactly like the Hachikuji I had met eleven years into the future.

Not a single difference.

Even so—even without any difference, I felt like living Hachikuji was somehow different from dead Hachikuji.

Was that—was this the difference between being alive and being dead?

"I thought maybe she was already hit by the car, and this was Hachikuji-the-aberration…" As the girl shook her head exaggeratedly, wholly intent on the residential map, I whispered to Shinobu. "But it doesn't seem that way, somehow. How can I put this? It's hard to express, but she just seems so…full of life."

“Hmm. Aye, I concur.” If the aberration slayer, who could convert aberrations into energy, said so, well, there could be no doubt. “And her shadow appears human, not snail-like.”

“That was only in the anime adaptation.”

“Yet ’tis baffling. Why should this lass, after departing at five o’clock in the morning, remain holed up in this park?”

“I don’t think she’s holed up…”

“She departed six hours ago. Nay, earlier?” reminded Shinobu, looking at my watch. Her severe expression indicated that she really did find it baffling. “At five o’clock this morning, thou wert at the high point of thy devotion to performing on my ribcage. As thou ’twere thy climactic solo.”

“There must be a better analogy.”

“At six o’clock, well, thou wert continuing to strum my ribs ’til such time as ye might awaken.”

“If that’s true, are you sure your ribs are okay?”

There’d be more than just a handprint.

I wouldn’t be surprised if I’d broken some bones as if they were strings on a guitar.

“Kakak. I expect a hand-printed apology.”

“Quit ribbing me,” I said, then returned to Shinobu’s earlier question. “Though I’m not certain…”

“Mm?”

“She’s probably lost. She said it was her first time venturing far from home…”

We had accounted all along for the possibility that Hachikuji would get lost, but we never thought she would get this lost.

However we could consider this fortunate.

A real life-saver.

I was the one hoping to help her out.

But instead it felt like I'd just been saved.

"…"

A sense of déjà vu washed over me as Hachikuji returned her gaze again and again to the residential map and compared it to the note that, I assumed, had Mrs. Tsunade's address written on it.

I'd been shown that note.

That Mother's Day.

I couldn't help but recall that Mother's Day when I met Hachikuji though at the moment, it wasn't déjà vu at all but a reality that would occur eleven years hence.

What I had to do now was to make sure that it stayed a mere sense.

I.

"I remember it all… Gently approaching Hachikuji as she struggled there, then guiding her to Mrs. Tsunade's house…"

"Thou art forgetting something important."

"What do you know about it?"

I'm pretty sure you were still hugging your knees in the abandoned cram school back then.

Are even my memories transmitted through my shadow?

If so, then I don't have even a sliver of privacy.

"Don't worry," I assured, "in such a serious scene, even I no, especially I, won't make the same mistake twice."

“Hmm.”

“I’m not going to come out swinging,” I promised.

And with a hmm, thought about what to do next.

Be prudent.

Take your time and think.

The original plan was that I would casually tail Hachikuji as she headed for Mrs. Tsunade’s. Casually blending in with the crowd in the crosswalk, I would quite literally follow in her footsteps—in other words, I would act like I was in the secret service, but since the package (i.e., Hachikuji) had gotten this badly lost, we had no choice but to modify the plan.

Because if things kept on this way, it was entirely possible that Hachikuji wouldn’t reach the Tsunade residence even if she spent the entire day trying.

“…Hmm. What to do? Shinobu, do you think you could touch my hipbone? Maybe something will occur to me.”

“Thou art becoming that rarity, the high school bone fetishist.”

“Mm, I’ve got it.”

Leaving aside whether or not she actually touched my hipbone, I devised a new plan. Actually, it had already been in sight, in that I was brooding.

It was just a matter of getting up the nerve.

I left the shelter of the tree and began walking towards the sign with the residential map—that is, towards Hachikuji.

“What dost thou intend?”

“What don’t I intend? I’m going to guide her to Mrs. Tsunade’s house.”

“How now? You intend to make contact?”

“No other choice. If she keeps wandering and stays lost, the likelihood of an accident goes through the roof. There a problem with that?”

“I think not. While I have no counsel to offer thee, neither have I a warning. Then again, to be on the safe side, perhaps thou shouldst not give thy name. There is already a Koyomi Araragi in this time period, after all.”

“Right. Then for now call me Muscle Ogata. Just for the time being, of course.”

“First thy bone fetish, now this powerful longing for muscles□thy proclivities are approaching far domains incomprehensible to ordinary folk.”

Maybe I was past approaching and all the way there.

Dreadful.

Meeting an unknown Hachikuji made me terribly anxious, but since I’d already done it once, I thought I could do a better job this time.

I was not going to come out swinging, of course.

I was confident I could properly guide her.

Let all behold the mature me.

So, muffling my footsteps (?), walking on tiptoe (?!), being as discreet as possible so the target wouldn’t notice (!!), I approached Hachikuji from behind.

Single-mindedly and repeatedly comparing the sign to the note in her hand but still having a hard time making heads or tails of it, seemingly at the height of confusion□Hachikuji didn’t notice me as luck would have it…and I.

I came up behind her and flipped up her skirt with all my might.

It covered up the entire top half of her body, backpack and all.

“Agghh!”

Naturally, Hachikuji let out a scream.

The scream stirred a certain nostalgia in me—but without turning around, she dashed off at full speed, her skirt still over her head.

A child’s dash.

But a child whose leg-strength was, I expect, well above the national average for fifth graders.

“Oops!”

“’Tis not a question of oops.”

“Crap! What the hell! If I were the protagonist of a manga, what, I would be Ryo Saeba?!”

“Thou art putting a most positive spin on things. I rather think thou wouldst be Ataru Moroboshi,” Shinobu retorted. She really seemed partial to Shogakukan. “And I do not wish to sound critical, but Ryo Saeba is a name only a middle school boy would think cool.”

“That sounds so critical and nothing but! Damn, was that ‘the compulsion of history’ getting in the way of me rescuing Hachikuji?!”

“At the moment, it could only be called ‘reaping what you sow’…”

Ignoring Shinobu’s overly correct riposte, and cursing the heartlessness of fate.

I chased after Hachikuji.

However fast the girl might be, there was no way she could outrun a vampire—in the space of a moment I caught sight of her.

It looked like I would reach her right upon leaving the park—and once I did, I’d have to begin by persuading her that I wasn’t

sketchy.

A herculean act of persuasion…

Hang on a second, though. When I flipped up her skirt, Hachikuji took off like a frightened rabbit without so much as a backward glance, so she wouldn't recognize me if I could somehow get ahead of her, then, and enter the scene as though I'd had nothing to do with it, I could maybe repair my earlier mistake.

While I was contriving this scheme, I slowed my pace a bit until

"Ack!"

Something totally unforeseen happened.

Hachikuji, having raced out of the park just kept on racing right into the street.

Into a crosswalk.

But the signal was red.

Red.

The color that means stop.

And into the crosswalk plunged a truck, slowing down not at all.

017

It's a common trope in manga and elsewhere. When a child□or maybe it's a cat? Or a dog?□is about to be hit by a car, some guardian angel races out into the street and thrusts them out of the way, only to be run over in their stead…

When I was a little younger, I too was moved by such episodes of devotion, with their heroic elements and embodiment of a certain type of self-sacrifice, but as one might expect, once I reached high school, I came to wonder whether such a feat might not in fact be physically impossible.

In reality, no human can run faster than a car for even a moment, so there's no way they could react by the time they've realized what's about to happen.

And animal bodies, be they child or pet, are constructed with an exquisite sense of balance, so even if you got a hand on them, they wouldn't necessarily comply with your desire for them to go flying out of harm's way. To put it another way, don't take gravity lightly.

In which case, both the person who is doing the saving and the person who is being saved would get hit, so what would be the point?

There's also the notion of wrapping your own body around theirs to protect them instead of trying to thrust them out of the way. But the impact from being hit by a car is too much for any human body to cushion. Don't believe me? Just try listening to the appalling sound a car accident makes.

And if things go poorly, the one being protected is going to end up doing the cushioning.

Ultimately, the issue is the out-of-spec power and surprising girth of

a car□however.

However, this was different.

I was a vampire whose power and speed surpassed any automobile's.

I had enhanced my vampiric level simply for the sake of a smooth stakeout, in other words to turn Shinobu into a middle schooler, but□here it worked to my advantage.

I ran at Hachikuji who, dead center in the crosswalk, didn't notice the truck bearing down on her□and thrust her out of the way.

With a Hie! she went flying, helpless in the face of my vampiric strength, and all the way to the far side of the crosswalk□there was no equal and opposite reaction to stop me, so my excessive dash power carried me to the far side of the street a split second after her.

Where I smashed my face into the ground.

The truck grazed the heels of my shoes□

Never slackening its pace as it went by.

Sounding its piercing horn for all it was worth.

From the driver's perspective, an elementary schooler and a high schooler had come flying out in front of him while he was going through a green light at a perfectly legal speed, so that was probably all we could hope for.

I hadn't been thinking that carefully about it, but since I was a vampire, I probably would have been fine if I'd been hit□a body that can withstand the supernatural violence of Kagenui's onslaught isn't going to be destroyed by anything so measly as a truck□but then again, if it hurt this much just to smash my face into the ground, once again I'd done an outrageously risky thing without thinking it through.

Being hit by a truck… I could have died from the pain alone.

A traffic accident.

Fearsome.

“Art thou alright?” asked a voice in the ground.

Or, more precisely, a voice in my shadow.

Shinobu seemed to have made a split-second decision to sink back into it so as not to interfere with my acrobatics—this state of perfect coordination being perhaps one of the few fruits of our battle with Kagenui.

“Yeah…I’m fine…”

“Enough of thy daredevil behavior. Vampires have great powers of regeneration, but that meaneth not that we feel no pain.”

“I realize that, thanks… I’m experiencing it as we speak… But I can’t lose consciousness…”

I couldn’t pass out now.

If I did, it’d all have been for nothing.

“Shinobu…say something to pep me up.”

“Naughty? Not naughty?”

“Naughty.”

“If thou dost not pass out, I shall deign to massage the soles of thy feet with my little girl’s ankle.”

“Gwohhhhhhhh!”

I held on to my consciousness with every ounce of resolve I could muster.

I clenched my teeth, I chewed my tongue and cheeks, and the pain somehow helped me keep my wits about me.

It will be mine!

I swear it will be mine!

“Um□are you all right?” I was asked once again□but this time it wasn’t Shinobu’s voice, and it didn’t come from the ground. I was startled.

And looked up.

“Yeah…I’m fine,” I answered□just as I had done Shinobu.

Answered the person crouching next to me in apparent concern as I lay fallen on the ground□answered Mayoi Hachikuji.

Answered.

To that lost young lady.

With pigtails and a backpack.

“…Are you all right?”

“Y-Yes, thank you. This is all because I ran out when the signal was red.”

“…”

As far as I could tell.

Even though she had run out recklessly, heedlessly, Hachikuji seemed not to have suffered any scrapes□the backpack she was carrying must have cushioned her fall.

I had smashed my face into the face of the Earth, while Hachikuji had been cushioned by her backpack?

“’Tis simply the karmic reward you each have earned,” commented a voice from the ground.

Thanks for that.

By the way, only I could hear Shinobu’s voice.

“Well and good then. It seems the accident hath been successfully

averted.”

Really?

It was unclear whether it was an event historically meant to happen as such or a contingency caused by my behavior (flipping the skirt) not historically meant to happen at all.

The signal had been red.

During Hachikuji’s accident, the signal had been green□plus she never said anything about it being a truck that hit her.

I was stumped…

This wasn’t even a question of a time paradox.

If it was the latter and I hadn’t managed to push her out of the way just now, Hachikuji would have gotten into an accident all because I’d traveled back in time□and thus the wheels of history spun and spun.

It was so complicated.

I didn’t want to think too hard about it.

For my desire to rescue Hachikuji itself to become the reason for her accident□I’m not trying to defend my actions, but calling it karma or “reaping what you sow” didn’t get us anywhere.

It was terrifying.

Right now, I was□making an enemy of fate.

Because if I hadn’t been in vampire form, I absolutely wouldn’t have been able to rescue Hachikuji.

“I’m sorry. Some creep was creepily chasing me, and I panicked. I didn’t think to look at the signal or anything…”

Hachikuji sounded truly apologetic.

Which made me feel apologetic.

That creep was me.

It was me creepily chasing her.

On the other hand, I was also relieved.

She didn't seem to recognize me, after all.

"Oh yeah? A creep, huh, inexcusable… Well, the world's full of weirdos, so you've got to watch out."

I feigned innocence with all my being.

I could feel a painful stare coming from within my shadow but ignored that with all my being as well.

My vaunted vampiric healing having already eased the pain, I started to get up.

"Well, thankfully a man like me, the very picture of decency, just happened to be passing by."

"Yes, it's true…"

Hachikuji simply nodded.

Huh.

I thought maybe a retort was on the way, but nothing.

She seemed plain old remorseful.

Aha□obviously.

This Hachikuji.

The Hachikuji from this time□didn't know me.

She chatted away with me in the present as amiably as you please, but at first she was quite shy around strangers.

And of course.

This was before she encountered a snail.

“I’m also a little bit lost, just at the moment□to tell the truth, I’m on my way to mother’s house, but I don’t know this area anymore.”

I’ve forgotten, confessed Hachikuji□in a tiny voice.

Like she was going to shrink away to nothing.

The note with her mother’s address on it crumpled in her fist.

On hearing this.

I stopped screwing around.

I said, “Well then.” Said it straight. “Here, let me look at that note.”

It was the exact same line I’d spoken to Hachikuji the first time we met.

018

In the end, I didn't have anything you could really call a conversation with the Mayoi Hachikuji of that time, which is to say the living Mayoi Hachikuji—she kept mum the whole time I was guiding her to the Tsunade place.

She seemed anxious.

She seemed afraid.

Peering up at me, like she was appraising me.

Well, I wasn't foolish enough to imagine that I might win her trust just by saving her from imminent death by truck—since nobody actually died—but unfortunately, the trip to the Tsunade residence wasn't long enough for this "don't-talk-to-strangers-mode" Hachikuji to relax around me.

"Thank you very much," she said when we arrived, offering only the most formal expression of gratitude.

I'd be hard-pressed to say it sounded sincere, but then again, it's probably unreasonable to expect more from a fifth grader.

"Sure. So long," I told her.

And with a slight wave, doing my level best to seem like a cheerful, sociable, nice young man—I walked away from Hachikuji.

But then, I suppose it was what came next that was important for Hachikuji herself. Because between the time I departed, or more precisely, between the time I pretended to depart and went to keep an eye on her from behind a concrete wall, and the time she pressed the button on the intercom, another full hour elapsed, and—

"Yes?" the response came from the speaker.

It came. And I don't know what happened after that.

Because once Mrs. Tsunade responded, I took off for real.

"What, canst thou not watch the touching reunion between parent and child?" asked Shinobu, puzzled. As though she didn't understand where I was coming from.

"What, did you want to watch?"

"Nay, I have no interest. I thought that perhaps thou wouldst desire to see it, however."

"Well, I would be lying if I said I had no interest." Though I did want to turn and look back at the Tsunade place, I firmly suppressed that desire. Instead, moving away at a good clip, I said, "But it's private□or rather, it's something I shouldn't know. I've already gone too far by meeting Hachikuji and exchanging even a few words."

What's more, it wasn't necessarily going to be a touching reunion.

I wanted it to be touching, of course, but sometimes the world just isn't like that.

After all, I had no clue how Hachikuji's mother felt about her daughter at this point.

I didn't know who had wanted the divorce in the first place, and even if I did, you should never stick your nose into other families' affairs.

I could only pray.

That Hachikuji's mother cared about her as much as her father did□

"That's it then, Shinobu. We've done what we came to do. Back to the present."

"Mm? Thou art finished?"

"I am. Nothing else to do."

“Thou dost not wish to visit the bookstore, or check out Miss Loli Tsundere, or take that house’s picture?”

“I mean, it’s not that I’m not reluctant to go.” I didn’t remember ever suggesting anything about Miss Loli Tsundere, but…I let that one slide and answered Shinobu’s question. “Honestly, the past is exhausting.”

“Aha.”

“There’s so much to worry about, so much to be nervous about. I feel so worn down. Not to mention that I kind of feel like what we did was pointless□like if I hadn’t gone all out like that, hadn’t done anything at all, Hachikuji might have gotten to Mrs. Tsunade’s house anyway.”

“’Tis not so. Thou□hast properly altered the course of history, methinks.”

Even if history shall correct itself in a few days’ time, Shinobu admitted.

It didn’t seem like she was just telling me that for my sake.

I think she really believed it.

Well, it’s not like I actually thought everything I had done was meaningless□if anything, I had said it just for the sake of appearances, and the truth was that I was tired.

Seriously.

Tired.

“But you know,” I mused, “I think humans constantly change history just by being alive. Anyway, got the time?”

“None may possess time.”

“It’s just an expression! Like ‘time is on my side.’”

“Nay, ’tis on my wrist.”

“That’s actually a decent line.”

But so what?

I just wanted to know what time it was.

“’Tis four in the afternoon.”

“So it’ll be the twilight hour soon enough. We’ll wait until then, head back to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, and return you to the brink of full vampiredom—then you can create a time tunnel to return us to the present.”

“Hmm. I still hunger most powerfully to taste the Mister Donut of this age—though if we possess no coinage, there is nothing to be done.”

“Well aren’t we sensible. I was secretly afraid you were thinking of launching a raid.”

“Mr. D is holy ground. Ne’er would I attack it.”

“…”

This one was a little too attached to Mister Donut…

Left one hell of a good impression.

“False trivia time,” I announced. “The Mister Donut company was created when Kentucky Fried Chicken founder Colonel Sanders decided after his retirement to try his hand at something sweet.”

“Thou hast revealed from the start that thy trivia is false.”

“Shoot!” Forget shoot, it was a shitty lie to begin with. Also known as idle banter. “All right then, shall we go? But try to get it right this time. We’re going eleven years forward, so don’t give me any twenty-two years into the future stuff or anything. I may have been able to cope with the past, but I can’t cope with the future. My cell phone won’t work.”

“Calm thyself, my lord. Since the day of my birth, never have I met

failure.”

“Not that again…” She was too obstinate. But even if I burst her bubble, it wouldn’t get me anywhere, so I said, “That’s right! You’re my greatest partner!”

And Shinobu mumbled, “Oh, aye…”

Sounding plain old bashful.

I just couldn’t get a read on this one.

Anyway, we wasted no time in heading for the mountain, and by the time we had climbed the steps to Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, the sun had gone down.

My mind had been all over the place the previous day, so I hadn’t noticed that the path up the mountain seemed much steeper than it did eleven years in the future.

Though it may just have been one of those thoughts you can’t shake once you think them.

You’d think the path would be more difficult eleven years later, since the plants would be eleven years more overgrown, but… maybe it doesn’t work like that.

Plants also wither and rot.

But that aside, what really surprised me was the state of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine itself.

We were eleven years in the past, so while it obviously wasn’t going to seem newly built, I nonetheless expected the shrine to retain at least some vestiges of its original appearance. But from the torii to the main hall, from one side of the grounds to the other, every inch of the place was completely dilapidated.

Just like in the present.

No, though I’m fully aware that it’s a misguided impression based on a preconception, allow me to say it was worse.

It looked even more ruinous than it did eleven years down the line.

“What the hell… C’mon, give me a break. I thought we were in the past, but is the twist that in fact we’ve been in the future the whole time? Someone could write a pretty interesting mystery novel using that trick.”

“Not anymore, thou hast given away the ending.”

Nor is it so, Shinobu stated with conviction.

“Hast thou not encountered thy acquaintances, the former class president in her childhood form and Hachikuji? And thine own childhood self? Hachikuji and shota Koyomi are one thing, but ’tis unthinkable that thou might mistake the Loli former class president.”

“Too true.”

I had some issues with the monikers she was using, but I let that slide—I would never mistake anyone else for Hanekawa.

Given the difference between living Hachikuji and dead Hachikuji, Before and After Aberration, it wasn’t impossible that I had mistaken someone else for her, but still—regarding Hanekawa, I was positive.

That was the eleven-years-ago.

Six-year-old Hanekawa—no question.

“Then what’s going on? I can see it laid out before my eyes, but it doesn’t make any sense. What does it all mean?”

“There can be but one explanation. Sometime in the intervening eleven years the shrine will be restored, after which it shall be allowed to go to seed once more.”

“Restored…” Hmmm. If that was true, for the sake of argument, well, it wasn’t unconvincing… It was a rational thought and all. A little too rational, somehow, an expertly painted topcoat over the feeling that something was wrong. “But…we don’t have to worry

about that, I guess. We're going home either way Shinobu. Go ahead, drink some more of my blood, and power yourself up right to the brink."

"Nay, my lord. There seems to be no need, for 'tis already here."

"Huh?"

"This place in this time, too, is overflowing with spiritual energy," Shinobu said, casting her gaze across the shrine. "'Tis true that this place became a hangout for aberrations eleven years hence thanks to my coming, but it seems that 'twas primed to become so even before then."

"Hmmm."

I didn't understand any of that.

It wasn't something that I could pick up with my vampiric sensors; it seemed to be entirely a question of experience.

"'Tis possible that someone like myself hath already come."

"…"

"Well, there should be no problem if I expend it all. If there is something here, 'twill be nothing with a beneficent influence and while the Aloha brat might have a good way of dealing with it, I have not. What is more, returning me close to my full power carries with it a certain risk."

"Risk… Was there any?"

"That I might turn on thee," Shinobu replied flatly. "'Tis precisely because I have lost my power that I have become close with thee, and the more power I regain, the more I return to my role as an aberration how far thou wilt trust me, now that is another matter."

"…"

Hearing that, I didn't know what to say.

Shinobu.

She surely distrusted herself more than anyone else.

To the point that she once tried to kill herself.

“Now then, shall I again use the torii to create the gate?” she asked, and capitalizing on my silence, steadily began the preparations for our return trip. She was getting the hang of it, it being her second time and all in the blink of an eye, the black wall had appeared again within the torii.

“Hey, what about the incantation?”

“Hmm, I forgot.”

“Whoa there.”

“Not like that. I hath not forgotten the words, I merely forgot to chant it.”

“It amounts to the same thing.”

So it had only been thrown in for effect.

Sheesh.

While I said before that it felt nostalgic, the fact is, it had really gotten me psyched up.

“My lord.”

“Yeah.”

She called me over, and I stood next to Shinobu holding hands as we’d done in coming to this time.

Intertwining our fingers.

“Let’s just be clear about one thing. When I jump, there are going to be steps on the other side, right?”

“Aye. The stairs of eleven years hence.”

“Okay then…”

In that case, I’d better prepare myself… Got to kill as much of my momentum as possible…or no, maybe I should throw caution to the wind and jump backwards.

“Nay, I cannot really recommend that. ’Tis important to picture thy desired destination. In leaping backwards, thou may condemn thyself to wander forever in the interstices of time and space.”

“Cannot really recommend that? You should be stopping me any way you can!”

“Nay, for a vampire, ’tis not a life-or-death matter.”

“You’re being too blasé about this!”

Being condemned to wander lost for all eternity in some other dimension as a reward for rescuing a lost girl would be one hell of a punch line! And being immortal makes the punishment even worse!

“All right, all right, I’ll jump facing forward… I mean, if this body can survive a full-bore thrashing at Kagenui’s hands, then I should be able to fall down some steps without dying.”

In the end, Shinobu and I just jumped into the black wall the same way we had when we came and returned to our beloved present.

With no way of knowing what awaited us there.

I couldn’t possibly have imagined how much the world of the future would be altered by saving Hachikuji or.

You know what, let me get straight to the point. When our little jaunt through time ended, when Shinobu and I returned to our world

That world lay in ruins.

019

When you hear the term “post-apocalyptic,” what kind of world do you envision?

A desolate expanse of land, devoid of a single blade of grass?

A frozen expanse of ocean, enveloped in mighty glaciers?

A blazing expanse of sky, engulfed in scorching flames?

Everyone probably has his or her own vision of ruination, but what I, what Koyomi Araragi envisions first and foremost when he hears that word, is actually not the state of the world itself.

To put it another way, I don’t care what state the world is in.

A blighted wasteland doesn’t equal ruination.

Massive glaciers don’t equal ruination.

Firestorms in the atmosphere don’t equal ruination.

To give an extreme example, even if the Earth exploded and vanished completely from the universe, I wouldn’t necessarily say that was the end of the world.

However transformed the world might be.

However finished the world might be.

As long as there are□people.

The world hasn’t ended.

Yes, and so when I envision a post-apocalyptic world, what I see is a world without a single person□and.

The world to which we returned from our eleven-year time slip, in other words the world of the present that I thought I knew, was exactly that kind of world.

I fell down the stairs as before—and this time, whether it was thanks to how I landed or because of my enhanced vampirism, I happily didn't lose consciousness—but what awaited us was a ghost town devoid of any human presence.

A ghost town—

So ghostly that no other expression suited it better. Since it was in fact the entire world that lay in ruins, perhaps "ghost world" was even more appropriate.

Naturally it took us some time to realize this.

In fact, at first we weren't sure we had actually managed to travel the eleven years back to the present—because (and in retrospect this makes sense, of course) when I tried my cell phone, I still couldn't connect.

I wasn't receiving 1seg, just like eleven years in the past.

And when I dialed Senjogahara and Hanekawa, I couldn't get through.

"Oh, come on," I groaned. "Did you screw it up again? Another botched job for Shinobu the Blunderer?"

"Cease that disgraceful mode of address. If thou dost not retract thy words forthwith, thou shalt at last discover the limits of my tolerance."

"Has she already forgotten…?"

"I have not erred. I am confident that this time, 'twas an unqualified success."

"Doubt it. Where's the proof?"

"Thy need for proof demonstrates the difference in our intellectual

level.”

“What’s with the big talk? ‘Intellectual level,’ my ass! Plain old ‘level’ would do! Hmph, anyway. We’ll know once we get down into town.”

After that exchange—after what was in retrospect a truly idyllic exchange, Shinobu and I began our descent.

When we passed under the torii eleven years ago it had been the middle of the night, and it suddenly became daytime when I fell down the stairs, so it seemed that at the very least we’d traveled through time. The question was: to what day, what month, what year?

And what to make of the fact that my cell phone wouldn’t connect? Since it was certainly possible that it was busted (possible, namely, that it was malfunctioning because I’d taken it into the past), this was no easy judgment to make.

Just when were we?

We headed into town, totally misapprehending the problem at hand, and as we headed in we still didn’t notice anything. We didn’t understand a thing.

Even though the terrible mess we had made was being shoved in our faces—

“What the… There’s nobody around.”

“’Tis true.”

“What happened? Did everyone move away all at once?”

“Or perhaps the everyone-avoid-thee plan hath been put into motion.”

“What, am I being bullied on a town-wide level now?”

That was the extent of our awareness.

Not that I thought they should have held a grand parade to welcome me back from the past…

“Mayhap everyone is devoting themselves to their homework? ’Tis the last day of summer break.”

“Regular grown-ups don’t have homework over summer break… That is, they don’t have summer break to begin with.”

“Oh, no?”

“For the sake of convenience they disguise it by calling it the Obon holiday. Or, wait. If we time warped on the night of the last day of summer break, then today wouldn’t be the last day of summer break at all.”

“Ah, ye may be right. I was wrong by a day. If the time warp was indeed successful, today would be the first day of the new term.”

“You were so confident that you’d been successful…”

“My confidence transcends reality.”

“That just means you were wrong… No, hang on, if that’s true, then this is bad. Really bad. If it was a pirate, it would be Sinbad. I never finished my summer homework, so I’m going to have to blow off the very first day of school.”

I was in trouble.

If it was just a question of not doing my homework, in the end it’d be fine, but my poor attitude would be reflected in my permanent record. The poor impression he makes is beyond the pale□

And so on.

These were my concerns.

My misguided concerns.

Since this was now a world where those kinds of concerns were totally unnecessary.

To say nothing of it being a world where it didn't even matter whether it was the last day or the first, such trivial distinctions having lost all meaning.

What really made ignoring my sense of disquiet impossible—what made me start noticing the sense of disquiet that I expect I had been feeling all along—wasn't the lack of passersby, but the realization that there wasn't a single car on the road.

Sure, this was a rural town, and the population wasn't much to speak of, but for that very reason, cars were an indispensable mode of transportation—and yet.

Not a single car.

I could state with absolute certainty that even if I ran out into the street, even if the light was red, I wouldn't get hit—a road so deserted it could be used as a runway for airplanes stretched out before my, before our, eyes.

…No.

The traffic lights weren't even working.

Every single one was out of order—with nary an out-of-order sign to be seen.

"Shinobu. Does something seem strange to you?"

"Speak not to me."

"What, why not?"

"I am deep in thought. So, speak not to me."

"Okay…" From her tone of voice, it didn't seem like a gag, so I said, "I'll think too."

And the conversation ended there.

There was a long period after spring break when Shinobu didn't speak, but at heart she was a real talker, so lately it had been

unusual for the chatter between the two of us to falter—the scene laid out before us, however, was even more unusual.

And while I said I would try thinking too, the more I thought, the more I sank into deep sorrow—the closer we got to my house, the more my uncertainty turned into unease.

In reality, it was clear at a glance.

But it was hard to put the what and why of it into words—it was beyond words.

One straightforward example: the trees lining the road and the gardens of the neighboring houses were all overgrown, like no one was tending them at all—everything was like that. Or, while this might be a less straightforward example, the rows of houses themselves.

They looked damaged—decrepit.

I don't know.

Maybe it was just my imagination.

Having witnessed the town as it had been eleven years earlier, maybe it was natural that, in comparison, the vicissitudes of time were lending such an impression to what had once been familiar.

However.

How can I put this—I knew.

I knew this kind of town.

To be precise, I knew these kinds of buildings.

Like the back of my hand.

"Hey, Shinobu…"

"…"

Unable to stand all of this weighing on my mind, I spoke to Shinobu

again, but this time she didn't even say, Speak not to me.

She didn't say anything at all.

Come to think of it, the first thing Hachikuji ever said to me was, "Please don't speak to me"—anyway, unable to seek refuge even in our misguided attempts to avoid reality, we kept walking.

The truth is, we were just shuffling our legs.

We were just kicking against the pricks.

Without wavering—without losing our way, you might say—both Shinobu and I had come to a conclusion quite a while ago.

But in order to avoid bringing it out into the light and recognizing that conclusion as the conclusion—in order to delay being presented with conclusive proof.

We were kicking against the pricks.

In reality, we'd already been presented with conclusive proof—nevertheless, we kept on kicking against the pricks, trying to scratch that unscratchable itch, right up until we arrived at the Araragi residence.

My house, as damaged as damaged could be—was conclusive, definitive, unshakeable proof.

Damaged.

Not just fallen into ruin—damaged.

Not in disarray—damaged.

The kind of damage—that can only come from a place being uninhabited for months and months.

The dust was piled high, and it resembled nothing so much as an abandoned building.

In fact—well, even if it took looking inside my own house to make

me realize it, the whole town.

The whole world was like that.

Yes.

I knew them well.

I knew these kinds of buildings.

I know that abandoned cram school.

Uninhabited, neglected, at the mercy of the elements in brief, my town was one big abandoned ruin.

In other words, it had become a ghost town.

“Monday, August twenty-first 9:17 a.m.,” Shinobu read the display on the clock radio, the one with the calendar function that was set in front of the TV in our house’s living room. “I daresay the time warp itself hath gone as planned.”

Then again, it was doubtful that that clock was still properly receiving radio transmissions it was hard to believe that an antenna was still functioning well enough in this world to convey the hour.

True, the display agreed with my cell phone, so Shinobu was probably correct in her conviction that the time warp itself the return to the present had been successful.

What I actually felt on hearing that was not joy at learning the current time, however, but the forlorn emptiness of the banal fact that, even without people, a clock went on working as long as the batteries held out.

At the very least.

This showed, at the very least, that someone had once changed the batteries though I had no idea how long the Araragi residence had been abandoned.

I picked up the remote and tried to turn on the TV.

Nothing happened.

I suspected this wasn't because the batteries in the remote were dead but because no electricity was flowing to the house itself. Even though it wasn't dark, being daytime and all, I flipped the light switch just to make sure.

Nothing.

The light bulb wasn't burnt out either.

"And the traffic lights weren't working… Somehow I feel like I'm starting to understand the situation…though I still can't seem to wrap my mind around it. Hmm, it stands to reason, but it doesn't look like it's been abandoned for as long as that old cram school. It feels like it's been neglected for maybe a few months, at most half a year?"

I voiced my thoughts just as they came to me. Not really understanding, not really going anywhere.

"If we go to my room and check how far I got in my study guide, we should be able to determine when this house when this town, became unpopulated…right, Shinobu?"

Though I wasn't giving much thought to what I was saying, I was still more or less talking to her. But she gave absolutely no response.

This was different from the "I'm thinking" silence that she'd maintained all the way back to our home it was as though she couldn't even hear me.

She wasn't ignoring me because she was lost in thought it was more like she couldn't be dealing with me.

"Hey, Shinobu."

"…"

“Hey, Shinobu!”

“Hiekk!”

When I approached Shinobu and addressed her, touching her collarbone (not her ribs, just to be clear…), she finally responded and turned to face me.

“O-Ohh… I knew not who ’twas, but ’tis thee.”

“Who the hell else would it be? Everyone’s gone.”

Karen and Tsukihi.

My mother and father.

All gone.

Like smoke, or mist□vanished without a trace.

“Everybody’s gone, just like the…was it the Mary Celeste? That ship where the entire crew just vanished… Not that there are mugs of half-drunk coffee lying around or anything, but still.”

“My lord. Shall we not investigate another domicile, just to be sure? To confirm if ’tis only the Araragi residence that is so, or if ’tis indeed the entire town.”

“I don’t think there’s anything left to confirm.”

“And yet we must be sure.”

Such is our responsibility, urged Shinobu.

Well, she was right about that.

There was both the responsibility, and the sense of responsibility.

We decided to survey not only the neighbors’ houses but the whole town□and spent five full hours at it.

Were we seeking relief by doing this or looking to descend further into despair? Judging by the result, it can only have been the

latter—no, I have to say, I don't know which.

How can I put this… Somewhere along the way inertia took over, and no matter how much this unreal situation thrust itself into our reality, we remained staunchly unable to accept it.

We got back to the Araragi residence before 3 p.m. Coffee or something would have been nice, but the water and gas were shut off, same as the electricity.

Shinobu and I sat on the sofa, bereft of both food and drink (there were actually some snacks in the kitchen that hadn't spoiled yet, but they were the type of dried stuff that's too intense to eat without a beverage to hand, so we decided to hold off).

If you want to know, we weren't sitting facing one another, but in a lap embrace—Shinobu in my lap, naturally.

"All right, then." It didn't matter, since it was evident whichever of us ended up saying it, but by way of setting an example, or maybe to take some kind of responsibility, I said it. "World's been destroyed."

"Yup."

"Cute response."

"Yup."

"So I guess there's no question that your careless time slip has changed history."

"I can but think that history hath been altered because thou didst save that lost lass."

The prospect of a two-man cell with zero sense of accountability reared its ugly head as we sat blithely blaming the whole thing on each other. In another light, that showed the extent to which we both felt accountable—however.

However.

“It’s no good…” I lamented. “The whole world. The scale is too big, it just doesn’t feel real… It’s so shocking, I can’t even panic.” If spring break was hell, and Golden Week was a nightmare—I couldn’t help but feel that this was all just a joke. A funny one, even. “Though Karen and Tsukihi are missing, though I can’t find Senjogahara or Hanekawa, or Kanbaru, or Sengoku, I can’t seem to grieve, which is frankly a real shock… It’s too much to even cry over.”

My consciousness just couldn’t catch up.

The feelings just wouldn’t come.

In reality, “shock” probably didn’t begin to express it.

Come on—the entire world?

The magnitude of such an incident wasn’t something a high school student could come to terms with.

“I mean, it totally caused a time paradox, after all. What happened to the compulsion of history or the theory that fate corrects itself? Whatever happens, and whatever results from it, humanity’s been wiped out just because I saved a lost girl.”

“Hm. The butterfly effect,” Shinobu said like she got it now. Like she had come to understand a new term all on her own—isn’t that nice, what a clever kid.

“But what the hell happened? I mean, after we saved her, did Hachikuji do something outrageous in her newly prolonged life that caused the whole world to fall into ruin?”

“Methinks the lass hath not the capacity…”

“Yeah, and it doesn’t seem like there was a nuclear war or anything.”

While the town, and all the houses, were damaged, it didn’t look as though they had been destroyed by weapons. It really did seem like an abandoned town, where the damage just came from neglect—

“It kind of feels like every single resident was kidnapped… Do you think maybe someone like Raoh from Fist of the North Star conscripted them all for his army?”

“There’s no semblance of such harsh ruination…but I know not.”

Ugh, grunted Shinobu, slumping all her weight against me.

She appeared defeated, but not by the powerful midday sun that beat down on us as we surveyed the town—it was psychological.

While she had lived for 500 years, or make that 600 years, maybe precisely because she had lived for 600 years, her spirit could be very weak—to the point that she’d wanted to commit suicide.

So this situation, this reality.

Might have been even harder on her—than it was for me.

Though she may have seen the ruin of many nations and the downfall of many regimes—that doesn’t mean she ever developed the fortitude to accept ruination.

In fact, maybe it’s just the opposite.

That kind of experience has to be traumatic.

“The butterfly effect…” I muttered. “Given the circumstances, we’re lucky we raised each other’s vampiric levels, huh, Shinobu? We’ll both be fine even if we don’t eat or drink anything for a while.”

“If thou art seeking consolation, I suppose there is that,” Shinobu said. “It seems I can but abandon my plan to feast on donuts for the nonce.”

Yup.

It hardly promised to be the only thing we’d be giving up.

020

In this sort of instance, I would always start by trying to get a handle on the current situation. But this time, at least, the honest truth was that there wasn't really any situation to get a handle on.

Because the world I would've gotten a handle on lay in ruins.

It was meaningless to get a handle on anything.

If we were going to seek any consolation, as Shinobu put it, in this situation—not that there was anything left you could really call a situation—the silver lining was that it seemed my memory hadn't thus far been altered to accord with "history"—in particular, I still remembered my summer break in the "unruined world."

My summer break, the one I knew—the summer break of an unruined history.

It was like a daydream, that summer break that had now never existed.

My back and forth with Kaiki.

The rehabilitation of Senjogahara.

My violent encounter with Kagenui—I remembered all these things, which had probably never even happened in this present, in this timeline.

On the other hand, my memory had not been supplemented with events from this altered history—that went not only for summer break, but for that Mother's Day three months ago as well.

My memory of encountering that lost young lady, Mayoi Hachikuji, my memory of our subsequent lighthearted repartee, none of it had been erased.

By rescuing Hachikuji from that traffic accident in the past and delivering her to Mrs. Tsunade's doorstep, I definitely should have staved off her transformation into an aberration, so that Mother's Day never happened, which would be at odds with reality□but that part didn't seem to have been corrected for.

It resolved one concern, anyway.

But considering the overwhelming number of concerns that were presenting themselves before me, I thought perhaps that wasn't a consolation worthy of the name.

"Good grief… It feels like I just forgot to perish along with the rest of the world."

"Affect not such coolness despite the circumstances. As though this were a Hollywood movie."

"Miss Shinobu, lover of Shogakukan. Are you familiar with a gadget that appears in an early Doraemon episode called the Dictator Switch?"

"I am not."

"How are you a true Fujiko fan again?"

"I know only later Doraemon."

"So you're a bandwagon Fujiko fan."

"Tell me of this 'Tater-dick Switch already."

"Dictator Switch. It's a gadget that will erase someone you don't like from the world at the push of a button. Not kill them, but make it so that they 'never existed'…so that the person is even erased from the memories of people who knew them."

"Ho ho, a useful gadget indeed."

"Except that it doesn't exist. Anyway, it's an item from a sci-fi-heavy era of Doraemon, but…because Nobita is just that kind of character, in the end he uses the button to erase all of humanity."

“A fearsome dictator indeed.”

“Sure, some people define a dictator as someone who carries out genocide… Listen, I’m not trying to do any deep thinking here, it just occurred to me that it feels like someone used the Dictator Switch on this world.”

“Thou art saying that Nobita may yet be alive, somewhere in this world!”

“No. What a conclusion to jump to… Plus, being a Nobita fan is just weird. Nobita moé is totally incomprehensible to me. But never mind that. Every single human on Earth vanishing is unthinkable under ordinary circumstances. It’s impossible without some sci-fi element thrown in, whether it’s genocide or a mass kidnapping. It would take a long time.”

“Hmm…”

My attempt to draw a simple-as-possible example from manga hadn’t gone all that well, but it still seemed like I had managed to get my point across somehow.

Before going to my room to check how far I’d gotten in my drills, I scrounged up a bunch of newspapers that were squirreled away in the house.

The Araragi parents (by which I mean my mother and father) being very methodical people, newspapers and advertising circulars were carefully sorted and stored away.

I guess tidiness was in the genes□and if the world had fallen into ruin in stages, that is, “by the book,” following proper procedure, then that process, or at least a harbinger of it, should be lurking somewhere in the pages of those newspapers. I began skimming through them with that assumption in mind.

I would find the info much more quickly if only I could connect to the internet on my cell phone, but as it turned out, paper was the last medium standing.

In a few hundred or a few thousand years, all that paper would turn

to dust, though—and in the end we were completely out of luck anyway.

Well, out of luck in terms of finding out what happened—by what process the world fell into final ruin—but it wasn't as if I learned nothing whatsoever.

The papers stored in the Araragi residence went all the way up to the June fourteenth evening edition.

There wasn't a single issue from after that date.

When I went to my room to see how far I'd gotten in my drills, the book was open to the page with the same date.

"Of course, there's no guarantee that the me of this timeline didn't just abandon his drills there… If only I'd kept a diary."

"Can we not examine thy younger sisters' journals?"

"No, I can't imagine those two kept one, either…and supposing they did, even this big brother wouldn't read his little sister's diary without permission!"

Well.

The dates definitely matched, so that was reliable enough, as far as it went. And we had incidentally confirmed that the me of this world was also properly engaged in exam prep, which was its own kind of comfort—

"Now then," I began, returning to the living room and opening the June fourteenth evening edition once again. "We can say with confidence that something seemingly happened, some kind of something happened, during the night of June fourteenth—after the evening edition had been delivered, but before the morning edition had been printed—and the world crumbled, not in stages, but in one fell swoop."

Something exactly like the Dictator Switch. Something science fictiony.

“I don’t know how advanced the weaponry had become in this world, but I can’t imagine they developed anything that could *poof* erase every single human, and only humans, all at once.”

“Which meaneth, what?”

“Which means it must have been some kind of aberrant phenomenon. Only an aberration can circumvent the compulsion of history, or the theory that fate corrects itself, right? Which is why you can time travel, and why I was able to save Hachikuji—why I was able to prevent her transformation into an aberration.”

“I see. ’Tis a plausible explanation.”

“Yeah…”

That was how I tried to make sense of it, anyway.

And my reasoning probably wasn’t wrong, but—however right, I couldn’t deny thinking, So what.

If it wasn’t an aberrant phenomenon?

Same difference.

What was the point of analyzing it?

Seriously…

I, Koyomi Araragi, feel that in my own way, I’ve been through a lot. Not just the hell of spring break and the nightmare of Golden Week that I keep mentioning. I believe every tribulation I experienced helped me grow emotionally.

But—this was a whole other order of magnitude.

All told, up until now, things had been more or less confined to an individual level. Even the Great Yokai War had been prevented beforehand—of all the incidents thus far, Black Hanekawa’s atrocities had claimed the most victims, but then too, no one from the general public had died.

Yet, now, let alone someone dying.

Every living person on Earth was gone, a whole other kettle of fish.

“Hmmm. If something happened around June fourteenth or fifteenth, I guess the world’s current state of ruination is the result of two months having passed since the annihilation event… In other words, it happened quite recently,” I broached the subject with Shinobu—I did, but she remained silent, methodically rubbing her temples.

She was prone to wild mood swings, so checking the newspapers and confronting reality might have put her in another dark humor—or so I thought, but that didn’t seem to be the case this time around.

Instead.

She simply seemed vexed.

“What’s wrong, Shinobu?”

“Well…something is flitting about the edges of my mind…but I cannot quite put my finger on it. My memory hath truly become a wreck.”

“What the hell, you have some idea what’s going on? About why the world is like this—or about what aberration made it this way, if that’s what happened?”

“Hmm…I wonder.”

Shinobu tilted her head dubiously, but the possibility was there. Back at the abandoned cram school—now everything was abandoned, of course—she had sat through a number of Oshino’s lectures on the subject of aberrations.

For Shinobu, who had been consuming aberrations regardless of type, it was like learning the names of ingredients—in which case.

“Wait,” I said, “it’s entirely possible that the Shinobu of this altered timeline didn’t sit through Oshino’s lectures…”

“Even if the me from this world did not, the me who is here hath, so ’tis of no account.”

“Oh, right.” So complicated. It was all a paradox in my head. “Actually, hang on a sec. If we keep following that argument, the situation is going to become even more complicated, but…where do you and I stand in this timeline?”

“Stand?”

“When we went eleven years into the past, I met myself. Okay, we didn’t meet, I just took a peek at him, but still.”

“Indeed. And most adorable he was.”

“His cuteness is irrelevant.”

“’Tis most relevant. I am praising thee. Rejoice.”

“Under the circumstances, no, I do not rejoice at having my seven-year-old self’s cuteness praised. The question is, what’s become of that cute kid eleven years on?”

“What, ye ask? Hath he not become a smartass high school student?”

“That’s not what I mean. I’m talking about what happened to young Mr. Araragi on X-Day in the middle of June of his senior year in high school.”

“…”

“At the time you would’ve still been cohabitating with Oshino in the abandoned cram school… Or did that aspect of history change too? Well, either way, along with everyone else□I guess the two of us perished?”

Died□for some reason I was reluctant to use the word.

Death is hard to handle, as Ononoki might say.

More than anything, though, there were no corpses.

“There are probably lots of aberrations that spirit you away, right?” I continued. “Feels like a relatively realistic deduction that all of humanity might have fallen prey to one… So does that mean I was unable to resist that aberration?”

Shinobu was one thing—but if even Oshino and Hanekawa were gone, there was no way I could have survived the phenomenon.

“My lord. Methinks ’tis overly hasty to adjudge this phenomenon aberrant.”

“Huh? How come? Didn’t you just agree with me?”

“I merely called it a plausible explanation. I never said ’twas surely so—look to thine own words for evidence. If the foe were an aberration, they could not dispose so easily of me, nemesis of all aberrations that I am. And what is more, that Aloha brat, so fond of his balancing role, would ne’er overlook an aberration capable of destroying the entire world. Unless he had a reason to.”

“Oshino… I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s alive somewhere in all this.”

Hm?

Hold on.

The middle of June… In the proper timeline—although this was now the proper timeline, I suppose—that was right around when Oshino left town, wasn’t it?

I didn’t remember the precise date, but that was about when—quite a coincidence.

Did it mean anything?

“Methinks ’tis naught but wishful thinking on thy part,” Shinobu said. “We must admit that both thou and I have likely perished in this world.”

“You’re right…in which case, history really has changed.”

I didn't know what kind of guy the Koyomi Araragi in this altered timeline was—but a world devoid of me felt as horribly alien as it sounds.

I'd joked about forgetting to perish along with the rest of the world, but young Mr. Araragi hadn't forgotten at all and seemed to have properly perished like everyone else.

What an upstanding guy.

If I do say so myself.

"It does feel odd for me to be here right now in spite of that."

"At least we reaped some benefit. We know now the date the world fell into ruin," Shinobu said.

"Yeah, but the question is, what happened that day? Or that night? Until we find out, we can't do anything about it."

"Do anything? What canst thou intend to do in our predicament?"

"Well, assuming everyone's been spirited away or something, if we can resolve the aberration problem, won't everyone be returned to the world? Even if we can't fill in the two-month blank, we can at least restore the world to its original state."

I didn't really know.

But that hope still remained.

In that sense, I could certainly hope to see Karen and Tsukihi, Senjogahara and Hanekawa, and everyone else again.

"Which is why I want to know what caused the end of the world."

"I see," nodded Shinobu. "Such unwillingness to admit defeat is what makes thee who thou art, 'tis thy raison d'être—so, shall we go and find out?"

"Go? Go where? You mean we should expand the search area? Like head outside of town, or go all the way to Tokyo?"

“Nay, nay,” Shinobu waved me off before pointing out belatedly: “If we time slip again, to the night of June fourteenth, it shall become abundantly clear exactly what hath transpired.”

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“If you can make that happen, we won’t just be able to pin down the cause, we might even be able to clear things up!”

Don’t worry, let me assure you that that kind of ending isn’t lying in wait for you. The story doesn’t get resolved in the next five pages, with the rest of the book given over to descriptions of me fondling Shinobu’s ribs—though that would be legendary.

The reason isn’t that you can’t alter history or fate by returning to the past. That notion was merely academic by now, our time slip actually having caused the end of the world.

“Well, it might be hasty to assume that it’s because we saved Hachikuji that the world has gone kaput,” I said. “And besides that, we did all kinds of different things when we were in the past. We involved ourselves in all kinds of people’s pasts, from those middle school girls we happened to meet to Loli Hanekawa, that policewoman, Hachikuji’s father—even the driver of the truck that almost ran me down. For example, we can’t say for sure that by throwing that book at us, and thus losing it, Hanekawa didn’t turn into a demon queen.”

“Aye, knowing that lass…”

I’d meant it as a joke but got an impression that Shinobu was strangely persuaded.

That said, if we were dealing with the butterfly effect, we didn’t know which of our actions could have destroyed the world. How could we know?

But there was no need for us to go eleven whole years back to look for the cause—we only had to go back two months.

The direct cause of the end of the world, of the downfall of

humanity.

We just had to investigate the night of June fourteenth.

“So can we go back to that point in time?” I asked.

“We have no other choice. As I have said, however, should I fail, we might well return to the age of the dinosaurs though ’twould not be so different from this ruined world, methinks.”

“Not so different…”

I thought it would be pretty damn different.

Like 20-0 different. A forfeit.

In what game, I didn’t know.

But despite there being a big difference between this world where not a single creature was to be seen, and the world of however many millions of years ago, there might still be some similarities. Enough to make the comparison, anyway.

“Hang on a second, though. Even with your vampire powers restored, I thought it was possible to travel to the future, but not to the past. Giving you back any more power…”

Would be unwise?

Was she herself against it?

Sure, if she told me that, I’d have no choice but to agree, but under the circumstances

“Aye,” answered Shinobu, “and even with the return of my powers to their apogee, ’twould still be far from assured that we could effect travel to the past.”

“Hmmm…so, what do we do, then?”

“Think upon it. If thou and I were already gone by June, and the educational system was no more thanks to the downfall of society,

then naturally, there would be no need, nor indeed any possibility, of jumping eleven years into the past on account of thine undone summer homework—therefore in this timeline, the spiritual energy at the shrine must yet remain there, utterly unexpended.”

“Ah.”

Yeah.

That made sense.

It was obvious when I thought about it—so if we used that energy to jump into the past again—if we pinned down the cause of the world’s collapse and started over again from that point in time, we should at least be able to realign history into a shape preferable to this one, even if we couldn’t make it exactly the same as before.

“Hang on,” I said, “we might not even have to go to the trouble of determining the cause. Even though the whole ‘age of the dinosaurs’ thing was a joke, the time warp might be a failure again this time too, right, Shinobu?”

“I never fail, but I cannot deny the possibility that ye might.”

“How the hell can I fail if I’m just tagging along on your warp?”

“I told thee. Fundamentally, ’tis thee who adjusts the coordinates. I lack a sense of time—so our destination rests to some degree with thee. Come to think of it, it occurs to me now that our eleven-year mishap was not due to my failure, nor to the workings of the gods, but perhaps due to the fact that thou wert daydreaming of the contents of that lost lass’s skirt when we jumped.”

“Ahh.”

That certainly seemed possible.

Though I was positively not daydreaming about the contents of her skirt.

Nonetheless, I might have been thinking about Hachikuji in a slightly more earnest way.

“So if I can just keep my head, there’s no chance of the time warp failing, is that what you’re saying?”

“Nay, I cannot guarantee it. I work the pedals, while thou hast thine hands upon the wheel, so ’tis pointless to try and lay blame at either doorstep—if I press too hard upon the gas, or if thou dost not steer true, ’tis entirely possible that we might fetch up in the age of the dinosaurs. If thou art fearful of such a risk, then ’tis better we do not attempt the time warp at all.”

Just as the Aloha brat warned.

At this late date, she says this.

At this far-too-late date.

But even Oshino, even that disagreeable older dude who sees through everything, couldn’t have foreseen this situation.

It’s not like he’s Nostradamus.

“Well, Shinobu, what I wanted to say is that we should do the time warp even so.”

“What, hast thy spirit of adventure suddenly awakened?”

“No, but if we fail, and aren’t able to go back to June fourteenth, then so be it—whether it’s July seventh, Senjogahara’s birthday, or any other date, things can’t get any worse than they already are.”

“Hm.”

“And even if we arrive sometime earlier than June fourteenth, that’s fine—we can just go about our business, bide our time, and June fourteenth will arrive eventually.”

“…Hath that miso soup you call a brain fermented like soy sauce?”

“I have no desire to come up with a retort to such a snobbish line, but if you’ve got soy sauce on the brain, don’t forget that miso’s fermented as well.”

“What? How can something so delicious be putrescent?!”

“You’re really zero-percent foreign other than your hair color, huh? And, while we’re at it, soy sauce is delicious too.”

“’Tis not disgusting, to be sure, but as beverages go ’tis overly salty.”

“Soy sauce isn’t a beverage!”

“I drink it straight from the bottle.”

“You’ll die!”

“So, is that soup inside thy head miso? Or is it soy sauce?”

“It’s miso.”

“Then heed me. A week or two, or even a month or two, of playing catch-up would likely be fine, but we cannot be assured of such an interval. In our attempt to travel back but a single day, we leapt back eleven years, did we not? The calculation is not so straightforward, but were we to apply the same ratio to this attempt, we would end up 680 years in the past, when even I had yet to be born. We cannot afford to approach the problem without regard for success or failure. ’Twill not do to endlessly repeat this coming and going from present to past and back again every time we leap. History will be too much altered in the process, putting it beyond our reach to intervene.”

“But whether it’s 680 years or five hundred million years, what’s the difference? Obviously I’m exaggerating to make a point but□look, Shinobu, we’re both immortal, right?”

“Mm.”

“So we could watch over all of history□we don’t even know if covering the night of June fourteenth will be enough. I’m not being loosey-goosey about this, I’m saying let’s leap into the past prepared to supervise broad swathes of history!”

“Thine ambitions hath taken on massive proportions…”

Shinobu seemed dumbfounded, but, well, I was talking about big-deal stuff, so what can you do.

The truth was that, in my heart of hearts, one night of not being able to use paper money, not being able to use coins, sleeping in a drainpipe, and all the rest of it had been plenty for me—but things had changed, and now that wasn't going to cut it.

If, for the sake of argument, we were able to jump precisely to our estimated X-Day, then over the course of the subsequent two months—or if we failed, the subsequent however many years—we would correct history.

If history wasn't going to correct itself—then we had no choice but to take charge of the task ourselves.

"I don't have some laudable notion about sacrificing myself for the greater good, I'm just talking about giving it my best shot for a while so I can see Senjogahara and Hanekawa again—so I can see my sisters, and my parents, again. Call that my summer homework."

With that determination.

With that lame attempt at delivering my big heroic speech, Shinobu and I set off again for the hill on which Kita-Shirahebi Shrine stood.

By the way, when we returned to this era, my granny bike hadn't been parked at the foot (I thought, then, that this time it had been stolen for sure, but in this timeline I hadn't gone to the shrine on the night of August twentieth to time slip in the first place, so of course it wasn't parked there), but it wasn't at my house, either.

Hmmm.

Maybe the me in this timeline didn't ride a bike—could history have been altered in such banal ways?

Well, with the world in ruins and all, maybe one bike wasn't such a big deal, even if it was my beloved machine. I continued on to the shrine.

Carrying Shinobu in a koala embrace, out of habit as much as anything, since with night fast approaching she wasn't feeble enough to be tired simply from walking.

Through a town with no one left to hassle us about it anyway, no middle school girls, no police officers.

Not that this is a revelation or anything, but a world without people gets exceedingly dark come evening□just as the daytime sky is an exceedingly clear blue.

Probably, when night fell.

We would be able to see the whole sky filled with stars.

It reminded me of going to the observatory with Senjogahara that time□

……

Hmm.

What about that?

Did that happen in this timeline?

Or was I too late?

I didn't remember the exact date, but wasn't it in June?

"True, with our vampiric levels elevated, we could stargaze to our hearts' content even if the town was filled with lights and the air pollution hadn't cleared up. And I'm pretty handy at mountain climbing."

"'Tis more of a foot thing."

And so on.

I guess we were feeling the leeway to make such jokes because we were getting pumped up, or rather, incautious.

I've made it seem as though we decided what to do calmly,

rationally, but in reality Shinobu and I enthusiastically high-fived and fist-bumped each other over and over again when we hit upon the excellent idea we were about to carry out (a scene I definitely cannot let you see, dear readers). But then.

When we reached the end of the now-thoroughly-familiar climb and arrived at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

"…"

All at once Shinobu's face clouded over.

Like an overcast sky not a single ray of light can pierce.

As far as I could tell from her expression, I didn't need to go to the trouble of asking it might have been kinder not to ask but grasping for a last glimmer of hope, I did: "What's wrong?"

"Well…" Shinobu leapt down from my arms and alighted on the ground. "Not a shred of energy remains here."

"Oh."

My despondency and despair had already played out a few seconds earlier, hence the extremely curt response

But I wasn't about to accept it.

Shinobu and I had thought this through from every angle and reasoned that since no time slip had been carried out, the energy should remain totally intact.

"The cause is…aye."

Perhaps 'tis that, said Shinobu, quickly finding what she was looking for and pointing off in its direction.

I didn't see what she was pointing out, but she took off briskly toward it, so I had no choice but to follow after her despite my confusion.

I had to wonder who was trapped in whose shadow here though if

we're splitting hairs, with her vampiric levels advanced so very close to full, Shinobu could in fact leave my shadow for short periods of time (like I was the charger, and she was the cordless phone).

As we walked up the path and approached the main hall, I saw what Shinobu was talking about.

That dilapidated main hall.

No□the single talisman pasted there.

"What? Isn't that…"

I looked at the talisman□at first glance I wasn't sure, but after studying it carefully, I cocked my head.

I remembered, of course. How could I not? Oshino had asked me, or more precisely me and Kanbaru, to post a talisman there□in order to prevent the Great Yokai War, too big of a responsibility for me to bear, to be perfectly honest.

So I remembered it all too well.

I remembered it, and the subsequent incident with Sengoku, all too well.

However□

"It's a different one."

Not that I was much good at distinguishing talismans written in that kind of illegible cursive…

But to begin with, it was a different color.

The talisman I had pasted on the hall had been written in red India ink□but the one pasted there now was in black India ink.

"I mean, I don't even know if you can call it 'India ink' if it's red, but…what's going on here?"

“I too received only a partial initiation into such things from that Aloha brat…but ’tis less a question of differing type than one of differing effect. The talisman given thee by the Aloha brat in the unchanged timeline differs from that given thee in this changed timeline. So not only the fate of the world itself hangs in the balance of history, but many trivial details such as this.”

“Huh…”

“Though ’tis hardly trivial as far as we are concerned. The talisman that thou didst place had the effect of dispersing spiritual energy, while the talisman before us now is meant to absorb it.”

“A-Absorb?”

“’Tis several levels of efficacy greater than the one entrusted to thee. In terms of preventing the Great Yokai War, the effect is the same, yet…”

“Right.”

Yet it wasn’t the same at all for us.

If this talisman had absorbed all the spiritual energy we needed for our time warp, then we couldn’t return to the past. Our great idea, all our enthusiasm, had been spectacularly upset by nothing more than a slip of paper.

The glitch was a glitch after all. There was no reproducing it.

“I know I’m misplacing the blame and excusing myself,” I admitted, “but at the same time no one’s listening, so I’m just going to say whatever selfish thing I want to. What the hell, Oshino!”

“Selfish, indeed… From the Aloha brat’s perspective, ’tis all the same which talisman be used. Likely he selected without much consideration, based merely on habit or the inclination of the moment, because it made no difference.”

Yeah…that was probably true.

However much I might blame Oshino, it was totally unreasonable to

expect him to conserve the shrine's amassed spiritual energy on the off chance that Shinobu and I might need to time slip somewhere down the line.

No…

Even if he did think of it… He was a balancer.

He wouldn't do that for us.

"When thou art playing a two-disc DVD set, whether playest disc one first, or disc two, 'tis all the same."

"It's not the same at all…"

What if you played the special features disc first?

Enough with the half-assed analogies.

"But," I said, "I don't think he's so irresponsible that he'd leave something this important to habit or whim. Something about this timeline must have necessitated doing it this way… Well, no point now in trying to figure out what."

"Aye."

"Okay… Nothing for it now but to throw some money into the offertory box and leave it to the gods." It was a little too self-serving of me, given my earlier blasphemous remark that there was no god at a tumbledown shrine like this□but at this point, was there anything else I could do? "Hang on, if we take down this talisman and wait patiently, won't that spiritual energy stuff eventually build up here again? After all, this spot is definitely an air pocket. The danger of a Great Yokai War will return, but beggars can't be choosers□"

"My lord!" Shinobu yelled.

Trying to arrest the hand I carelessly extended toward the talisman□but she was too late.

I touched the talisman□

And was knocked back.

We're not talking about the snap of static electricity on a finger here, my entire body was blown backwards. I landed flat on my ass, and when I got back up and looked□

"……nkk!"

My fingertip was easily scorched.

No□more like carbonized. It must have burned down to the nerves, instantly, because I felt absolutely no pain.

The physical damage healed in a moment, of course, since I was currently in vampire form□but I couldn't seem to recover from the shock.

"Did I not tell thee? 'Tis a different type of talisman□ye…nay, any, including myself, who belong to the world of aberrations cannot so much as touch it, let alone remove it. As with a crucifix. We would be absorbed□consumed entirely."

"But wasn't it me who put it here in the first place?"

"Thou shouldst learn to listen until the end. To wit, thou quite likely didst come along on the journey, but the one actually entrusted with carrying the talisman hither must have been Monkey Girl□'twould be no problem for the lass, so long as she did not carry it in her left hand."

"…"

Huh.

So in this timeline, there was□a greater necessity to Kanbaru accompanying me? Maybe things happened differently with Sengoku, too. But.

But in that case…

"It's not just Kanbaru, everyone is gone from this world, every single person. There's no one in the entire world except for us,

which means there's no one who can remove this talisman…"

"Indeed."

"Well, then our plan is dead in the water…"

I wondered if instead of removing the talisman, we could settle this by taking the entire building somewhere else, but that'd be too easy. The efficacy of the talisman was probably suffusing the entire hall, so we couldn't do anything rash.

My carbonized fingertip made sure I kept that in mind.

"What is more, 'twould be pointless to remove it. 'Twas because I arrived in all my glory that so much spiritual energy gathered in this place. Such power would have no way to gather here again."

"Yeah? So it's hopeless."

"Hopeless indeed."

At this point, I started to suspect that Oshino had chosen this talisman out of spite to make things difficult for us after our time slip□not that he'd go so far as to get in the way of us trying to save the world from destruction just as a penalty for not heeding his warning.

But if he was being strictly impartial, maybe it was the right thing to do?

Even if we were trying to save the world.

Would he say, You must not time slip?

Balancer that he was.

"I wonder if there are any other air pockets besides this one in Japan. Or should we update the term to 'power pocket'?"

"Though we search blindly, like as not we must."

And so.

We intended to go on, even in the face of a hopeless situation, to go on vainly struggling. We'd wander, not that we were Oshino or Hanekawa, not that we could go overseas, searching for a spot that might possess enough spiritual energy for a time slip—we hatched a concrete travel plan to head first to Mt. Osore in Aomori, or maybe to Mt. Fuji in Shizuoka—however.

However, the situation was about to exceed anything we'd anticipated, by far.

Humankind had perished in this world.

Humans had disappeared from this world.

All those people had vanished—everyone, but where on Earth had they all gone?

I was about to find out.

Right, they hadn't gone anywhere at all.

I found out.

They'd been here—all along.

No, to be precise.

Their corpses were all along.

022

“!!”

Astonishment.

What other reaction could there be?

I wasn’t conscious of that much time having passed, but by the time I realized what was going on, it was pitch dark. It had gotten all mixed up with my pitch-dark mood, delaying the realization—or no, because my powers of sight were actually stronger at night, it wasn’t harder for me to see after dark, so maybe that was why I didn’t notice night had fallen.

Whatever the case, it didn’t change the fact.

That it was definitely too late.

By the time I realized what was going on—we were surrounded.

Surrounded? By what? you might ask.

And of course the answer would be—by corpses.

What’s more, they were—how can I put this?—decaying corpses.

Oozing, festering, their tattered clothing mingling with the flesh sloughing off their bones, those kinds of corpses.

With a thud.

A corpse’s—arm fell to the ground.

And not just one arm.

All throughout the scattered crowd of zombies, arms started falling to the ground in viscous streams before melting into the earth.

And not just arms.

Here a leg, there a torso, or a head.

Crumbling like fragile clay on a potter's wheel.

But they seemed indifferent.

Because just like clay reshaped by a potter's hands.

The arms regenerated with a muddy squelch.

The legs regenerated with a blubbery plop.

The torsos regenerated with a mushy sloosh.

The heads regenerated with a viscous pop.

They returned to the way they were before, then fell apart as before.

And it just kept happening, over and over.

Repeating, as though the corpses had been condemned to continue dying for all eternity.

Those corpses, which shouldn't have been able to move, wafting stench, nevertheless rose up, moved, and encircled me and Shinobu.

There were so many packed into the modest shrine grounds that counting them was futile, but since there was nothing else to do, I made a rough tally□and there were more than fifty people.

Or is that the wrong unit?

There were more than fifty bodies, is that better?

Perhaps, seeing that they were just barely managing to maintain their human forms, they needed to be treated as people after all, no matter what?

Was that the ethical thing to do? The moral thing?

But this…overwhelming situation seemed to upend such everyday concerns—this overwhelming situation of being surrounded by lumbering, decaying corpses.

What I felt in its face wasn't astonishment, then.

It was simple terror.

"Wh-What transpires here?"

It wasn't just me.

Shinobu, too, had turned pale. Though in her case, she was reacting with neither surprise nor terror but plain confusion, it seemed.

"What is the meaning of this—be these the inhabitants of the town? The corpses of the inhabitants? Did they catch wind of our presence and follow us up the mountain?"

"The inhabitants…"

Shinobu's words may not have been a soliloquy, she may actually have been asking me a question, but what was I going to say?

It was impossible to distinguish one individual from another among the swarm of corpses surrounding us, given that their faces were running like mud in a rainstorm—you could just about distinguish adults and children by the size of their bodies, but once you tried to get down to, say, males and females, things got extremely dicey. You could sort of tell from their frames—but at this point, why bother?

Yes.

I knew what to call these.

Not just me—everyone knew.

"Zombies…"

"Do not move, my lord…"

Not that I had anything particular in mind, but Shinobu grabbed the hem of my shirt as I was about to take a step and pulled me back.

Her face was still pale.

“It appears that if we remain here, they will approach no closer.”

“Oh…okay.”

Once she pointed it out.

I could see that though the zombies had us completely surrounded, they maintained a fixed distance—it had been hard to tell initially because of their sluggish movements.

Eyeballing it, I guessed the distance was about ten feet.

Around there they stopped walking and just bobbled from side to side.

But their number was growing with each passing moment.

They just seemed to keep on coming up the mountain.

“What the hell… Why don’t they come any closer?”

“’Tis likely due to the talisman,” replied Shinobu, pointing at the talisman pasted on the main hall behind us. “Thou hast experienced its efficacy for thyself. Thou wert able to touch it thanks to the humanity remaining inside thee—but they, who are clearly full-fledged aberrations, can only approach so close. They know ’tis at their peril that they approach any closer.”

“They know?”

Did they?

Sure, the fact that they weren’t coming any closer could be due to the talisman—thanks to the talisman, but…

Did they—actually have anything approaching volition?

Their eyes were vacant—or rather, nothing more than hollows

plugged with decaying eyeballs… Who knew if they could even see anything?

“I don’t really know what’s going on, but…are they the ones who wrecked the world?” I asked. “I’m pretty sure zombies eat human flesh, don’t they? And if you get eaten by them, you turn into a zombie too…”

“Well, it must be said that there are many variations in that regard—but for now, it seems best we depart from this place while the talisman retains its miraculous efficacy.”

“Huh? Depart? Isn’t this the only place where we’re safe?”

“As thou canst see for thyself, their number is increasing by the moment… To be honest, I cannot foresee how this will go. Even if they do not wish to come closer, they may yet be pushed forward when things become too crowded—and, well. They are aberrations, but I do not think they are my enemies…nor thine.”

True.

They were creepy, and being unable to tell what they were thinking made them all the more frightening and repulsive—still, I didn’t sense the same kind of combat ability that I did from the vampire hunters or the monkey.

It was just that there were so many of them.

That in and of itself was a problem—but.

Nevertheless.

“Nevertheless,” observed Shinobu, “knowing that they may have once been the inhabitants of this town, that they may be zombies created from the corpses of the inhabitants of this town, we cannot heedlessly plow through their midst.”

“Right.”

From behind her, I nodded at Shinobu’s unexpectedly upstanding remark.

If anything, I'd been thinking that maybe we ought to just plow through their midst, so the nod included a suitable amount of contrition on my part.

But seriously, what the hell was going on?

I had no idea.

Hadn't the world…hadn't the human race been destroyed?

Or□no. It couldn't be.

"Which is why for now we must flee, my lord."

"Flee□to where?"

We were completely encircled on all sides, left and right, front and back□and even now, the zombies just kept on coming.

Where could we run?

"If left and right, fore and hind are closed to us, there is nowhere to flee but up," said Shinobu, wrapping her arm around my waist□and leaping.

Not like a time jump.

This time she actually jumped.

"Whoa…"

We leapt into the air so suddenly that there was barely time for my startled voice to pass my lips□and we reached an absurd altitude in the blink of an eye.

If I had to guess, I'd say she jumped over a thousand feet into the air.

Without even bending her knees.

It was deeply dubious whether those zombies even had the power of sight, but if they did, it must have looked as though we'd vanished from before their very eyes.

The return of so much of her power had enabled the feat—and it was terrifying to think that she wasn't even close to full strength.

God, at the apex of her power she must've been able to jump into outer space without so much as a running start.

Maybe all that nonsense about toppling the sun someday wasn't a joke after all, maybe it was just a straightforward goal, well within her reach.

She might have been able to snuff out a star.

Which would definitely alter history.

"We seem to have made good our escape, for the time being."

"Yeah…but what the hell were those things?"

"I know not… Though they may not have been zombies, so much as—" Shinobu started to tell me but stopped in midsentence.

Because what goes up must come down, and in this case what goes straight up must come straight down, which wouldn't do us any good, Shinobu skillfully rotated her body (along with mine) in midair, spreading and bending her legs so as to exploit the air resistance, and began zigzagging through the sky, seemingly searching for a place for us to land—in other words, for a safe place as far away as possible from that zombie-covered mountaintop. However.

However, looking down from that great height, we could see that nowhere in our town.

Nowhere in the world.

Was there such a thing—as a safe place.

"……nkk!"

"……nkk!"

There in the sky, Shinobu and I—simultaneously found ourselves at

a loss for words.

At a loss for words, as we looked down on the nighttime town with our vampiric vision.

It wasn't that zombies had gathered atop the mountain at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

Fifty?

Sixty?

Maybe eighty in all?

That many zombies had been able to completely hem us in but that was a tiny minority.

"The town is…overflowing with zombies."

There was no point in looking for a place to land.

In every corner of the town there were zombies strutting around like they owned the place.

There certainly was no point in trying to count them, but the number was without a doubt roughly equivalent to the town's population.

No, not just our town.

If I strained I was just able to see the next town and some of the further outlying areas and it was the same phenomenon everywhere. The massive number of zombies who had appeared from wherever the hell they had been hiding up until now, buried in the ground or what, I don't know, were staggering around in the middle of their evening stroll.

In other words.

"Every single human has turned into a zombie?"

Humanity had fallen.

But they weren't gone—all of them, every single one, had become a corpse.

And an aberration, apparently.

The type of aberration that Ononoki would say—goes on in death.

"Holy shit…"

The result of trying to prevent Hachikuji's transformation into an aberration was that, somehow—I ended up turning the entire human race into aberrations.

"I've made an…inexcusable, unpardonable mistake… It's unbelievable, just by trying to change the past with a little time slip, I turned the entire human race into zombies…"

"Nay, my lord. Let this not discomfit thee," Shinobu said, still holding me to her. I thought she was just trying to comfort me—but that wasn't so. "'Tis I who have erred."

The vampire who'd gone white as a sheet wasn't trying to comfort me, but confessing.

"All this is my fault."

"…? What are you talking about? What, is covering for each other the next step after blaming each other? Thanks all the same, Shinobu, but it was me who—"

"Nay, I am not trying to cover for thee, 'tis simply the naked truth. The harsh reality."

"Shinobu."

"Enough, hark thee well. First off, those are not zombies, but the degraded shadows of what once were vampires."

"Vam—pires?"

You mean.

Like us?

That gaggle of aberrations, with their flesh sloughing off them like mud, those walking corpses?

“Not like us, like thee—for all of them, like thee, are former humans made into vampires by me.”

“Wha… By you?”

“Aye,” Shinobu replied feebly, looking sheepish. “In other words—the one who hath brought ruination upon the world in this timeline, is me.”

023

Now that our two protagonists have become the prime suspects for unprecedented worldwide ruination, a two-man cell unlike any before or since, it can't be helped if our readers abandon us in disgust. But even though to shut up now might be the least I, as the perpetrator, could do as a show of good faith, please allow me to relate the subsequent developments, presumptuous though that might seem. I feel a certain duty to do so.

A horde of zombies overflowing all over town.

No safe place for us to land.

I didn't know if they had any real will of their own, but recalling the circumstances back at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, it was clear that they would be all over us the second we touched down.

What they would do to us then was less clear.

But when I thought of their fangs, the only sharp things standing out amidst the dripping flesh□yes, when I thought of their vampire-like fangs, their vampire fangs, I started to get an inkling.

Naturally Shinobu and I were hardened veterans. Especially since we had enhanced one another's vampiric levels, we could probably "plow through" an infinite number of zombies like we were playing a shooting game at an arcade.

But if they were former humans□to say nothing of them being the town's former residents, then we couldn't do anything of the sort, just as Shinobu said.

On the other hand, if we alighted once more within the precincts of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, it was unlikely that we could maintain a safe equilibrium. It would be preferable to avoid being jostled by a huge number of zombies with that talisman at our backs, again just as

Shinobu said.

So what did we do, you might ask—carelessly having leapt into the air without realizing that anywhere we would try to land would be a playground for zombies, what did we do? I'm sorry to say the answer is kind of a letdown, which is that we didn't land at all.

We didn't land.

In other words, we kept on floating at an altitude of over a thousand feet.

For those of you who are thinking, How long can they really continue a conversation in midair?

I would ask you to recall that Shinobu Oshino can fly.

By sprouting bat-like wings from her shoulders.

Incidentally, I learned later that she's able to sprout the wings themselves (decorative wings?) even when she's in her less-than-full-power Easy Mode.

Which is a skill totally beyond my grade.

To actually fly, she has to be in proper Vampire Mode—she can't do so in her little girl form—but though I say her wings were bat-like, she neither rode the winds nor made use of any kind of buoyancy; the fact is that she remained aloft through sheer strength.

Flapping her wings madly, like a bee.

I didn't think she would appreciate being compared to an insect, though, so to her I said, Like a hummingbird.

Either way.

Maintaining our altitude at above one thousand feet, we waited out the night.

As protagonists, we were an embarrassment of a two-man cell (The original cover text was a lie. Strongest two-man cell in narrative

history, my ass), but in light of the physical and mental fortitude it required for us to remain floating at an altitude of a thousand feet for almost ten hours, maybe we can recover just a little bit of our dignity.

That said, there's no art to just bobbing there like an idiot (the lack was mine, not Shinobu's), so over the course of those ten hours we flew around observing the situation on the ground.

Every city, town, and village we spotted was the same. Pondering whether or not to continue on past the borders of the prefecture, we realized that our current patrol could only end in the same despair as our daytime search, so we returned to our starting point.

I thought about telling Shinobu, Fujiko fan that she was, This is kind of like a Perman patrol, but she was so despondent that I decided against it.

Maybe I should have said it precisely because she was so despondent, but□at the very least, it seemed best not to joke around until I figured out what she really meant about it all being her fault…

I think it was the right call.

Occasionally, even I make one□and then dawn came.

As the sun rose in the eastern sky, the zombie horde on the ground simply disappeared. And I mean literally disappeared… I don't remember taking my eyes off the ground for even a second, but before I knew, they were all gone.

It was almost like someone had set a timer to wipe them out with the coming of dawn. Had they sunk into the ground, or secreted themselves in the shadows? But it seemed unlikely that they would suddenly become so agile upon daybreak.

Whatever the case, Shinobu's (and my) power dwindled as the sun rose, and we suddenly couldn't maintain our altitude, putting us in a pickle of a precipitous beeline descent that would have ended with a deadly crash-landing for anyone else. So we were grateful for

their disappearance.

I say disappearance.

But they probably hadn't actually vanished.

They weren't actually gone.

They were there they were everywhere.

We returned to the Araragi residence walking through an abandoned town where not an iota of evidence remained that, up until a few minutes ago, a horde of zombies had been strutting about the place, we returned to the Araragi residence, and I talked with Shinobu in the living room.

To be precise, I listened to what she had to say.

All in all, the sky hadn't really been the place for that kind of conversation.

"So what do you mean it's your fault, Shinobu? Tell me," I jumped in without any small talk, still unable to offer anything in the way of refreshments. As you might expect, given the circumstances, I wasn't holding her in my arms. This was a conversation to be had face to face. "You don't just mean because you perpetrated a time slip, do you? Because then I'd be complicit and I was the one who suggested it in the first place, so I'd be the guiltier party. But you made it sound like this was a solo crime what's going on?"

"'Tis my fault," Shinobu said. She sounded exhausted. She'd been flying all night long but that wasn't why. "To be precise, 'tis the fault of my counterpart in this timeline."

"…? By this timeline, you mean"

In other words.

The Shinobu Oshino from this altered from this timeline that we altered?

"Aye. Two months previously, the me of this world, a me other than

myself, turned the entire human race into vampires—that is what I am telling thee."

"I still don't get it, Shinobu. How are those things vampires? Sure, if you define vampire broadly, I guess that could include walking corpses, but—oh, I see. Vampires are also called nightwalkers, right? And those things definitely spent the whole night walking around—though it really seemed like they were just out for a lazy stroll, not doing anything significant. Is that what you mean?"

"Hmm. I fear that both of us are equally confused, so perhaps 'tis best if I start at the beginning. In this case—ah, but 'tis difficult indeed to explain."

"Equally? Sorry, but I think I'm way more confused. During the day it's a ghost town, and at night it's zombie town. All the humans have become zombies, and you keep on insisting that all of it is your fault. I'm confident that right now I'm the most confused person in the entire world—though you and I are the only candidates left, I guess."

"…"

"Hey, so don't get all gloomy on me."

"I shall become gloomy if I wish. Because if I tell thee what I have done, thou shalt likely become truly enraged—of course I realize that cannot be helped, but nonetheless—"

"Quit talking like that," I said to an irresolute Shinobu, unintentionally interrupting her explanation as she sat awkwardly averting her eyes from me—to a Shinobu who'd never looked that way before. "Don't hold anything back. Listen, Shinobu. If we're going to start at the beginning, then I've got something to say first. Whether it's the you from this timeline, or the you sitting in front of me right now…"

I put out my hands and took hold of Shinobu's shoulders.

Standing up from the sofa, I crouched in front of her so that my face was level with hers.

Staring straight into her golden pupils.

“You and I are one, in body and soul,” I said. “What I have done, you have done, and what you do, I do too. If you did cause this somehow, it’s true, I might get angry, but I will never, ever turn my back on you. I love Senjogahara best, and I respect Hanekawa more than anyone else. Hachikuji is the most fun to talk to. But if I had to choose someone to die with, I would choose you.”

“…My lord.”

“If something is burdening you, don’t take it all on yourself. Share the load with me. In fact, it hurts me to think of you keeping anything from me.”

Shinobu writhed in seeming pain—perhaps I was squeezing her little girl’s shoulders a little too hard. Realizing this, I released my grip—but she no longer kept her eyes awkwardly averted from mine.

And.

“I too,” she said. “I too would have thee by my side, when my time comes.”

“…Yeah. That’s self-evident, you don’t even need to say it.”

If Shinobu were to die tomorrow, then my life could end tomorrow as well.

That vow was already written in stone.

Engraved in my heart.

Deeply, so deeply.

All the way down.

It had become flesh and blood—inscribed in my very bones.

“Hmm… Then indeed, I shall relate it in its proper order. Though, ’tis not as though I did not have some idea all along—’tis not as though a likely explanation did not come to mind. And ’tis not as

though the newspaper did not prick my memory."

"Yeah… Now that you mention it, you did say something, didn't you? What was it, something about your memory being fuzzy or something?"

"June fourteenth."

"Hm."

"At last I recalled what day that was—though I can only think the recollection hath come too late to make any difference…or no, perhaps it would have been too late no matter what."

"'What day that was'?"

"I expect thou dost recall it too. It was a most memorable day. Nothing springs to mind?"

"Well, it was the day the world fell apart, right? So of course it was memorable. The night of June fourteenth, or June fifteenth—"

"Nay, nay, 'tis not that of which I speak. I speak of the night of June fourteenth in the real—in the original timeline."

"I'm still not getting anything—and there was no article in that newspaper that rang any bells."

"'Tis nothing to do with any article. 'Tis only the date that is important."

"June fourteenth…the fourteenth, the fourteenth… Let's see, it was a Wednesday, so that means—the fifteenth was a Thursday, and…" I brought the month up on the calendar in my cell phone, but still nothing struck me.

"…It seems it shall not come to thee," Shinobu muttered, sounding somehow disappointed.

My total inability to figure it out was definitely disappointing—but no.

Judging from what she said next, Shinobu wasn't just disappointed that I couldn't figure it out. How can I put this?

She seemed disappointed—

By what an inherently disappointing person I was.

"If I were to tell thee that June the fifteenth was the day before thy 'culture festival,' might that jog thy memory?"

"…Ah."

So that was it.

Once she said it—once I made her say it, I finally caught on.

Caught on to just how obtuse I was being.

June fourteenth—the day before the eve of the culture festival.

Once reminded of that fact, I didn't have to try and recall what had happened.

By which I mean, there was no way I could forget.

That day, the day after my very first date ever, with Senjogahara—after our trip to the observatory, and also the day of Tsubasa Hanekawa's second transformation into Black Hanekawa—and.

The day Shinobu ran away from her home at the abandoned cram school where she lived with Mèmè Oshino—the day I ran all over town searching for her.

And finally, it was the day Mèmè Oshino left our town.

"It seems thou hast remembered."

"Y-Yeah…"

"Thou art the lowest of the low. Hast forgotten it all, the date of thy first date with thy sweetheart, the date on which that former class president, who thou dost perpetually call thy benefactor, underwent

such a grievous experience, forgotten the date I ran away and on which the Aloha brat departed.”

“…”

What could I say.

I’m sure you readers already figured it out and were laughing at me.

Well, maybe you felt too disgusted and just stopped reading.

Yup, I’m glad this came to light in a scene no one is reading.

“Come on, though,” I pleaded, “everyone always says I’m not manly, but I can’t remember important dates the way girls can. I don’t keep a diary or anything□”

“And yet, with so many events occurring in rapid succession, I should think ’twould be one date ye might recall.”

“The culture festival the next day was so fun that I forgot,” I offered in the way of an excuse, but I do sincerely regret it.

That said.

“That said, even now that you’ve reminded me what day it was, I still don’t get it. It’s true that a lot of things happened, but the entire world falling apart wasn’t one of them.”

From my date with Senjogahara to Black Hanekawa, to Shinobu, or Oshino□I couldn’t believe any of it was connected to the destruction of the world. Even if history got altered a bit…

“If anything, I guess Black Hanekawa’s rampage was linked to an aberration… Still, Black Hanekawa was much less out of control than during Golden Week… Then again, she did try to kill me, didn’t she?”

“Aye, and Black Hanekawa is not unrelated, but the important thing is my absconsion.”

“Your□absconsion? But that, if anything, we resolved without

incident□”

Wait.

No.

That was only in the timeline that we knew, the one that we experienced□which is to say that in this timeline.

Maybe something happened.

Maybe we didn’t resolve it at all.

“Ultimately, I have told thee little of the details of my absconsion, and thou hast never presumed to ask me. I am grateful for that consideration, and I do not intend even now to give thee a full accounting, but there is one fact that I can no longer keep hidden, which I will now disclose.”

“All right. But don’t act so self-important about it.”

“On that day, I intended to destroy the world if thou didst not find me.”

“It was that big of a deal?!”

No way!

I knew she ran away with some intensely grim resolve, but□I’d never imagined it went that far!

The whole world!

“You think on a massive scale!”

“Well, I was a globe-trotting vampire, after all…”

“A little too globe-trotting. Wh-Why?”

“I was driven to desperation□’twas a fit of pique. If anything,” Shinobu said confoundingly. “Nevertheless, I had lost my power at that time, so could not have accomplished it in any case. ’Twas nothing more than words, thoughts, but…it appears that in this

world, things went differently.”

“…”

She’d told me something like that before.

That during the five hundred (actually six hundred) years of her life, she’d wanted to destroy humanity any number of times… June fourteenth had been one of them.

I would never have guessed.

“…? Then, in this world… Hang on, this is confusing, but what you’re saying is that the Koyomi Araragi in this timeline wasn’t able to find you on June fourteenth?”

“So I believe. But, think on it a moment. The first to notice my disappearance on that day was the lost lass, was it not?”

“Now that you mention it…” Apologies as always for my vague recollection of the peripheral details, but now that you have. “Didn’t that day begin with Hachikuji spotting you in front of Mister Donut?”

I don’t remember it too clearly, but I remember bragging to Hachikuji about my date at the observatory with Senjogahara when I ran into her on the way to school that morning.

And that’s when she told me.

About Shinobu running away from home.

“Because I never heard about it from Hachikuji, I wasn’t able to find you.”

Wait.

Wait, that didn’t mean I wouldn’t have been able to find Shinobu.

Hachikuji did help in the subsequent hunt, but and this is a terrible thing to say about someone who helped you in the end, she didn’t actually contribute all that much to finding Shinobu.

And her escapade would've come to light sooner rather than later, even if Hachikuji hadn't told me about it…

So this is my conjecture.

It wasn't just about that day.

If Hachikuji—if Hachikuji-the-aberration didn't exist, then never mind June fourteenth, I wouldn't have met her on that Mother's Day in the first place—in other words, the Koyomi Araragi of this world was a Koyomi Araragi who'd never met Mayoi Hachikuji.

Which must have had some influence on his (and yes, I will venture to refer to him in the third person) actions, his character—even if only to the slightest degree.

Not just Mother's Day.

From May fifteenth to June fourteenth.

The me of this timeline missed out on that month of hanging out with Mayoi Hachikuji—and because that's the kind of me he was, he wasn't able to find Shinobu Oshino.

And so, at that moment.

At that pivotal moment in the tale.

I must not have been able to look to Shinobu to help me.

"…I see. In that case I probably—got killed by Black Hanekawa."

This timeline.

Had to be that kind of timeline.

"Shinobu. If you don't want to answer this question, you don't have to, so just take it with a grain of salt… Honestly, I don't even really want to think about the thing I'm asking, but I want to know what you think. We've been bound to each other like this ever since spring break, but as such, whether it's you or me, if one of us were to lose our life in some unforeseen accident, what would happen to

the other one?”

Since we were bound to each other, would the remaining one be dragged along on the road to hell?

Then again□

“’Tis the ‘then again,’” Shinobu replied promptly.

While I say promptly, there was no way she didn’t not want to answer□from her expression, it was clearly just the reverse, but nevertheless.

She replied promptly.

“Methinks the Kitty Cat definitely did not understand, lacking in wit as she is, but…that Aloha brat must have understood. Thou too must have heard it. That thou couldst regain thy humanity at any time, if didst but forsake me.”

“…The flipside of which is that if I were to die…if I were to be killed, you’d regain all your power and blossom once more into a legendary vampire□the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire, mightiest of all.”

In other words, in this timeline.

Shinobu Oshino□magnificently, auspiciously blossomed once more into Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

Like a flower blossoming out of season.

“I didn’t see my granny bike anywhere… Hahaha…”

At that fact□at that reality.

I laughed, in spite of myself.

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Now I see. The whole if I was going to die with someone, it’d be you vow was on point from that perspective as well.”

Won’t you share this coffin with me?

It was one hell of a proposal.

“Aye. And in this world, thou wert sadly unable to carry out thy vow to that effect—and I.”

Really did bring the world to ruin, Shinobu said.

With a truly grievous expression on her face.

“And by that interpretation, ’twas Black Hanekawa—namely, that former class president—who was my first target.”

Shinobu’s voice was so small as to be inaudible, as though it was the hardest thing she could ever have shared with me.

But—of course.

I couldn’t blame her.

I ought to have been able to prevent it—with a minuscule bit of effort, I could have easily prevented it.

I muttered, “Seems like there’s another way of putting it: this world is the Bad Ending world.”

1. Asking for help.

2. Not asking for help.

I-me chose number one. The me from this timeline chose number two—or, he ran out of time before he could make the choice.

A bad end.

A dead end for Koyomi Araragi.

“’Twas a bad end from the moment thou didst meet me. Directly after she slew thee, I must have attacked the former class president, and then I—I, who had regained the full majesty of my power, brought the world to ruin. Specifically—”

The people of this town.

The people of Japan.

The people of the world.

I made them all into vampires, Shinobu stated vigorously, quite unlike the way she'd delivered her earlier line.

"Made everyone into vampires."

"Realistically 'twas only the first few whose blood I myself drank, I should think. But as thou dost know as thou dost know better than anyone, the creation of a thrall is the creation of a slave. 'Tis the creation of a servant. Because I was on the brink of death when I drank thy blood, I gave thee a certain amount of freedom, but essentially a thrall is an offshoot of myself."

"Offshoot?"

"In other words, those few whose blood I myself drank became vampires who would bring the world to ruin along with me and continued to drink the blood of the surrounding populace. As zombiism spreads so spreads vampirism. The vampires so created are also my thralls, and so on down the line. They too become vampires bent on the downfall of the world. And thus they breed like rabbits, proliferating in a geometric progression and in a heartbeat, the world, or rather humanity, lies in ruins."

"…"

"Because it began here, this town and the surrounding areas were neatly taken care of, like as not. But in the neighboring prefectures and beyond, 'tis probable that unfettered panic swept the land. If this be a ghost town, 'twould not be surprising if larger cities like Tokyo and Osaka have been reduced to ashen wastes."

"Well…"

If there was panic on that scale, the Self-Defense Force would definitely be mobilized not to mention what would happen overseas.

Wouldn't be surprising if it got as far as a nuclear war.

But.

"But they couldn't stand up to you—to you and your thralls, could they… Those folks from the church that Guillotine Cutter and Dramaturgy belonged to probably went into action too, but…"

Even if they did.

No matter what action that crew of specialists might have taken—there was no way they could stop Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade at the head of an army.

If anything could stop that legendary vampire, it was the fact that she was—the type of vampire who absolutely refused to create thralls.

Who didn't propagate.

Only a lack of numbers could contain her threat.

If that vampire, who over the course of her life had only made exceptions for me and one other, were to get serious about creating companions—no, about creating a community.

Something unimaginably terrifying would occur—no.

In this timeline.

It did occur.

"One night to subjugate this region. One day to take total control of Japan. Ten days, perhaps, to dominate the world—"

"Hmm…"

Just like that, huh?

So I guess the entire world hadn't gone down in a single night—but it had still happened extremely quickly.

Well, rabbits do breed at an incredibly rapid rate… If it began with

a few people, let's say five, those five would lead to twenty-five, those twenty-five would lead to a hundred and twenty-five, those hundred and twenty-five would lead to six hundred and twenty-five, six hundred and twenty-five becomes three thousand one hundred and twenty-five, three thousand one hundred and twenty-five becomes—I can't calculate past there in my head.

It would reach six-and-a-half billion in a heartbeat.

"And you're saying that the very first one would have been Hanekawa—so, not Black Hanekawa, but Blood Hanekawa." Man, I'd have loved to see that, though I probably shouldn't admit it. "Knowing her, she was probably pretty industrious in turning people into vampires—she might even have taken command."

"In which case, the world may have fallen in a mere five days," Shinobu said and sank into silence.

Nope, she couldn't do that just yet—we weren't done talking.

If this was all true, then we definitely knew how the world had fallen—and how all of humanity had been transformed into aberrations, a veritable pandemonium unfolding in the night, but—

"Why do those aberrations look like zombies instead of vampires? Considering that they became thralls the same as I did, how did they end up as a completely different kind of vampire? My flesh never dissolved like that. On the other hand, if they're true thralls, then shouldn't they be able to fly like you? And while we're at it, that means that I'm dead, but you're not, right? What's the you of this timeline doing right now, and where? The post-destroying-the-world you, that is. Let's see, you're here, so—"

"I can answer both thy questions at once." Shinobu seemed to have her reply prepared in advance, as though she'd anticipated my (naïve, true) questions. "'Tis likely that the me of this timeline is already dead."

"—Dead?"

What?

Whoa there, hold on.

That overturned the whole premise.

If this whole situation existed because she brought the world to ruin, then for her to be dead□

“Nay, hearken to my words□I died after bringing the world to ruin.”

“…? So you weren’t killed by chemical weapons loosed by the human resistance or something? You’re saying that someone killed you.”

“That goes without saying. There is only one who could slay me at the apogee of my might□none other than I.” Shinobu pointed at herself. “In other words, suicide.”

“…”

I couldn’t tell her, Don’t be ridiculous.

Because from the start, Shinobu□Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade had come to this town in Japan to kill herself.

A suicidal vampire.

But because she encountered me over spring break□because I ended up saving her, she failed in her suicide attempt.

So.

So that was why.

After I died□and after her rage had been spent, there was no reason for her to go on living.

No reason□for her to go on living.

As a literal bloodsucking demon.

“And because I died, all of the vampires in my thrall became zombies.”

“Huh, really? Wait, didn’t you say before that if you died your thralls would become human again?”

“In thy case, bound to each other as we are, aye, ’tis so. For we are evenly matched in the balance between master and servant. Each of us is master, and each of us is slave—but thralls are different. True thralls are different. They are mere slaves, who cannot live without their master, though nor can they die.”

“Six-and-a-half billion slaves…”

The scale was mind-blowing.

What an absolute monarchy.

But if that monarch committed suicide—inevitably, the entire country, the entire world would descend into chaos.

Into mayhem, everybody running riot.

Or—vampiric bloodlust running wild.

“A vampire could become human again by killing you with their own hand… But if you’re dead, there’s no way back. No choice but to let their blood run wild and take its course.”

And the result—was zombies?

The erasure of will.

The healing factor run amok.

Leaving behind only the goal—of destroying humankind.

Which is why they had surrounded me and Shinobu.

Both of us were half vampire, but we were also something like half human—so they’d come to drink that half of our blood.

To turn us both into vampires.

“If so, that’s completely idiotic. Never mind me, but you’re their master.”

“There remains an ontological difference between this me and the me at the apex of my power, so it cannot be helped. They are the servants of Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, not of Shinobu Oshino.”

“So even if they drank your blood, they wouldn’t necessarily go back to normal.”

“If they would, I would allow it gladly.”

I had just kind of said it, but it seemed as though Shinobu took it seriously her voice was full of sorrow.

I couldn’t believe it.

To Shinobu, humans were some other species, a mere source of drinking water, but in spite of that.

In spite of that.

“I’m sorry,” she uttered that terribly uncharacteristic ill-fitting line.

To me.

“I never intended anything like this I only wished to be found by thee. To think that I brought thy precious world to ruin for such a peevish, childlike reason ”

“Enough. Don’t apologize.” Unable to bear seeing Shinobu like that, I interrupted her for a second time. “Don’t blame yourself. The you in this timeline might have brought it to ruin, but that was a different you.”

“A-Aye, ’tis true, but I am no different from her,” remarked Shinobu, despondent.

Geez...she really was weak in the spirit department.

The fact that this timeline’s Shinobu seemed to have committed suicide only bolstered that impression.

True, even if this timeline was composed differently, I guess it’d be

even weirder to actually keep your cool when you literally, without exaggeration, destroyed the world.

I was shocked too.

Not by the fact that Shinobu destroyed the world, but at the existence of a me who let it happen.

That day.

It was very hard for me to accept that a version of Koyomi Araragi hadn't been able to find Shinobu after she ran away that day, on June fourteenth.

The notion hurt far more deeply than the fact that the me in this timeline, in this chronology, was dead, seemingly killed, what's more, by Black Hanekawa or when you get right down to it, by Tsubasa Hanekawa.

So we were in the same boat after all.

The guilt was ours to share.

"Just the fact that you feel that way makes me glad, Shinobu."

"Even so, I cannot rest easy unless I offer thee at least a single rib from my body!"

"Too freaky."

My fetish didn't extend that far.

I'd rather the bones stay inside the body, wrapped in skin and flesh…but anyway.

Let's talk about that some other time.

There was no time for that now.

"…Actually, there's no such thing as 'no time for that now' anymore. In this ruined world, we've got nothing but time."

That's what I realized.

No reason to hurry.

Literally□not a single one.

“At any rate, Shinobu, no need to apologize. You didn’t do anything wrong, at least not the you who’s in front of me. From now on, we’re going to have to live just the two of us, in this ruined world, this terrifying world devoid of people, this horrifying world of millions of swaggering zombies. Even more than before, we’ve got to look out for each other.”

“My lord□”

“You haven’t done anything wrong, Shinobu.”

It was true.

If anyone did□then it was none other than the Koyomi Araragi from the now-vanished history, who didn’t finish his summer homework, the one who was here now.

In other words, me.

024

I'd like to add a few words here about further disappointments that were to follow.

We first waited for nightfall, then enacted the plan we had discussed the previous night at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine to seek out renowned power spots in Japan to use their spiritual energy to leap into the past and naturally our method of travel was to fly, with Shinobu cradling me in her arms. We'd developed a formula whereby I carried Shinobu while we were traveling on the ground, and Shinobu carried me when we were traveling through the sky but I'm deeply ashamed to say that the only places I knew about were ridiculously famous ones like Mt. Osore and Mt. Fuji. Although we exhausted ourselves and the night trying every place we could think of (at a speed slightly above Perman's "119 kph"), it all came to nothing.

There's no question that Kita-Shirahebi Shrine couldn't hold a candle to the numinous virtue of those places, but

"'Tis no good. Each and every place has been thoroughly sealed off."

Quoth Shinobu, giving her expert opinion.

"Perhaps 'tis only to be expected 'twas because that shrine had become an air pocket that the Aloha brat entrusted thee with the task of placing the sealing talisman in the first place. So 'tis only to be expected that these other places especially such famous places, would be sealed, if not by the Aloha brat himself, then by some other specialist in yokai and their ilk."

"Yeah? Yeah, I guess you're right… It won't do any good to check places just because they're power spots, then. In addition to being power spots, they need to be newly formed ones that the specialists

didn't notice or know about. Otherwise we won't find any gas there to power our time warp…"

"Their method of sealing is most perfect. When energy doth remain, they have rigged it such that none can make use of it."

It had seemed like such a good idea at the time.

But it was a fool's errand—though, as it happened, not entirely.

Since we'd been traveling at night we had of course been flying with our eyes trained on the ground below us—and once again, the zombies had appeared before we knew it, literally before we knew it, and we were able to observe their rampage—in truth they really were just night walkers, not destroying anything or doing anything else out of the ordinary. Our vantage point up in the skies also supported Shinobu's supposition that the destruction was centered on our town and radiated outward from there.

The farther away we got.

The more traces of panic…the more indications of the disastrous scenes that had unfolded.

Traces from which I wanted to avert my eyes.

But from which I could not.

"Shinobu, how can I put this…"

"Mm?"

On the road back—or I guess I should say, on the flight back.

Shinobu and I had the following conversation.

"There's a very old theme in stories—and more recently, too, it was a popular theme in YA literature for a while, where the protagonist has to weigh the fate of the world against the life of one girl, and he picks the girl. You familiar?"

"Aye, there are many such films."

“It’s moving, right? And cool. It’s meaningless to live in a world without you, I won’t save the world if it means killing you, that kind of thing□but listen. In reality, if you’re forced to choose between the world and a single girl, you’d have to choose the world.”

“…”

“I don’t know, it seems like you’d be running away from a difficult decision otherwise. As a matter of ethics, weighing the lives of a hundred people against the life of one, anyone ought to choose to save the hundred.”

“Yet□dost not that thinking run counter to thine own principles? Thou hast ever□”

“Yeah, I have. But doesn’t it seem like a pain in the ass for the girl? Being saved in place of the entire world is like suddenly being presented with a Cadillac on your birthday, you’d be at a loss or… To put it plainly, doesn’t the thought of being loved on such a grand scale feel kind of gross?”

“Art thou regretting having saved the lost lass, my lord?”

“I mean, I don’t know! But if Hachikuji found out that her salvation led to the end of the world, I don’t think she’d ever forgive me. She was so against getting anyone else involved in her business over the course of more than ten years of wandering lost□”

I.

I’ve never seen her get truly angry, but□if she heard that I destroyed the world on her account, she’d probably flip her lid.

No.

Even then, she wouldn’t get angry□wouldn’t blame me.

She’d simply be sad.

She’d probably just cry.

“But she probably died a few days after I saved her anyway, in a traffic accident or something, so she wouldn’t be doing any crying or any getting angry.”

“…Thy words are most unworthy,” Shinobu said.

She spoke without slackening the pace of her flight.

“At spring break, when thou didst offer succor to me as I lay on the brink of death, I was glad. Thou didst offer me succor without another thought, sacrificing not the world but thine own life in exchange for mine, and I was glad.”

“…”

“Though in the end, thou didst regret thine actions thou, who didst know nothing of what would transpire as a result of saving me, didst regret, and in regretting, tried to kill me perhaps even now thou dost regret thine actions, but even if ’tis so, it doth naught to tarnish my initial gladness.”

I had never known.

That Shinobu felt that way.

It had taken the end of the world for me to learn how she truly felt.

“Be that as it may, were I that lost lass, I would at the very least not want thee to harbor such regrets.”

“I don’t even know if I do regret it. I just…”

I just felt emptied out.

By the disproportionate retaliation laid on me by history, by fate.

By my own foolishness.

“But what of this: hadst thou not saved me during spring break, the world would not lie in ruins as it does wouldst thou rather ’twere so?”

“No…you’re right. That’s not what I’m saying at all.”

That was a whole other question.

It was just as I’d told Ononoki.

There was misery.

But there was also joy.

So regret was pointless.

“In the hopes that it will bring thee some modicum of relief, allow me to offer words of commonplace comfort. Wilt not such thoughts leave thee dead in the water?”

“Dead in the… What are you talking about?”

“Like as not, thou art thinking that by borrowing my power to carry out a time slip, an act as yet unencompassed by human ethics, thou hast committed a grave transgression but is it not taken for granted among human beings that one dost save a child about to be struck by a car?”

“…”

“If someone is drowning, save them. If someone is in trouble, save them. ’Tis wisdom that humans have cultivated over the course of thousands of years. Didst thou not save me in accordance with that wisdom?”

“Yeah…you’re right. I did, but…”

“Well then. None can deny that the saved child may grow up to become a criminal, a murderer. And likewise the child, saved from drowning, could go on to die a more horrible death.”

And the vampire I saved could destroy the world.

“Canst thou really say that the decision to save them was then in error?”

“…”

“The opposite pattern also holds. Thy beloved former class president, treated cruelly by her various parents growing up, obtained exceptional skills as a result. Should she then be grateful to her parents? Thank you for tormenting me instead of loving me?”

“That’s□”

No way.

That would be like asking Senjogahara to be grateful to Kaiki□benevolence is benevolence, and malice is malice.

You can’t suddenly decide that sometimes the end justifies the means.

You can’t.

“On the flipside,” I noted, “sometimes people’s parents love them too much□they’re spoiled and turn out worthless… I still don’t fully understand what Oshino meant when he said that people can’t save other people, they just go and get saved on their own□but maybe it’s something like that. That you won’t know if saving someone really saves them until later on.”

Oshino.

If he could see me now□what kind of advice would he give?

Maybe none at all.

Even under these circumstances, he□might not save me.

“…Which reminds me,” I said. “Those spots were probably sealed away long before you went about destroying the world, and probably watched over through the ages, but the kind of specialist who can create such a seal□Oshino, or Kagenui or Ononoki, and though I don’t want to think about it, and he’s probably a bit different, Kaiki… Where the hell were all of them during the end of the world?”

“Like as not they were wiped out.”

“Wiped out… I wonder. Oshino was able to remove your heart when you were at the height of your powers, and Kagenui specializes in immortal aberrations□”

“Aye, surely specialists of their class would put up a hard fight, but only if I were alone. If ’twere after I had created so many, oh so many thralls, they would stand no chance at all.”

They are human after all, she pointed out.

Her tone had become a little haughty, but as soon as she noticed that indiscretion, Shinobu let out a sigh.

Like she was disgusted with herself.

If I may, Shinobu has a remarkably high opinion of herself, so I wasn’t just swallowing the idea that it would have been as easy as she made it sound, but□of the three experts I knew, Oshino, at least, couldn’t let something like this pass; he would have done something□and if this was still the result.

Then whatever transpired.

Whether it had been an epic battle or a crushing defeat.

Oshino must have lost.

He□had met defeat.

In the face of a vast army of vampires.

“And yet, frankly…” said Shinobu, “I do not wish to think on mine own actions. Creating thralls with such reckless abandon. Like a woman who sinks into desperation, heedless of all else, at the shock of being spurned by the man she fancies.”

“That’s an analogy, right?”

“Mm, ah, no, uh, aye, ’tis of course merely an analogy.” For some reason Shinobu lowered her altitude in seeming consternation.

Night had already passed, so even if we'd crash-landed, it wouldn't have been much of a problem. "In any event, those experts, too, must have been made into vampires and become zombies in the end."

"Oshino a zombie…" Yeah, though he was kind of like a zombie all along. "It makes me feel really depressed to think that Oshino, for sure, and Hanekawa, likely the first to feel your fangs, and Senjogahara and Kanbaru and Sengoku, and Karen and Tsukihi—everyone became a vampire, and then ended up as a zombie…"

Friends and acquaintances might have been among the crowd of zombies who'd surrounded us at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine. With their faces and bodies, and of course the shape of their hips, lost in a sea of dripping flesh, I couldn't recognize anyone, but—the possibility wasn't low enough for comfort.

"'Tis indeed best not to think on it. Thinking on it will avail thee nothing."

"I guess so—and if I had to find some kind of silver lining, at least Hachikuji wouldn't have become a zombie, being already dead and all."

Though that was cold comfort.

In exchange for keeping Hachikuji from becoming an aberration, I'd turned the entire human race into aberrations instead.

However Shinobu tried to console me, that fact almost made me lose heart. But if I actually did lose heart—Shinobu would probably get depressed too, so no matter how deeply conscious I was of my own guilt.

I couldn't let it get me down.

…Maybe this was another instance of choosing one girl over the rest of the world—simply an instance of evading a tough decision.

"While we're at it, I haven't seen any cats or dogs either," I said. "Do you think they're all done for as well?"

“Aye, vampires are one thing, but ’tis doubtful that zombies appreciate the distinction betwixt humans and such lower beasts.”

“Hmm… Insects and plants seem to be doing okay, though.”

In that sense, did it mean the world hadn’t perished even if humankind had, and the Earth was doing fine?

I don’t really want to say this since spouting such a cliché will reveal the limits of my humanity, but homo sapiens’ downfall might just be a good thing for the planet.

Our conversation lasted all the way back to our town—back to our ghost town.

I say town, but it no longer functioned as one in any capacity now that society had utterly collapsed, by which token there was really no reason and no need for us to return. But you get attached to a town where you’ve lived for so long.

Whatever we did in the end, I wanted to be based there for a while longer.

…That is, the farther away we went, the more ruinous the cities became, so without question our town offered the best quality of life in the entire world.

Never in a million years would I have dreamed that our nothing little town in the sticks would achieve such a glorious distinction…

After we touched down, we made for the supermarket on foot, me carrying Shinobu as per our arrangement.

At last my hunger was reaching its limits, so it was a pressing concern to purchase some food and other essentials—though it was impossible, in this case, to purchase anything.

Naturally, I was carrying some currency appropriate to the era, but there were no employees at any of the shops to give it to. At night they might show up in zombie form, but I had a hard time believing they would be willing to accept my money.

They would just try to suck my blood, devoid of any sense of professional duty.

“Still, I feel endlessly guilty about just taking whatever we want…”

“Art thou so faint of heart?”

“I’m the kind of guy who can’t leave an arcade until I spend all of the 100-yen coins so they don’t suspect me of having used the change machine for business purposes, okay?”

“Far too faint of heart.”

“Let’s just leave the money on the counter and go.”

“Thy heart is so faint as to be imperceptible!”

Well, I wouldn’t be able to do that forever, but at least the first time.

The majority of the food was rotten and the store interior was filled with an overwhelming stench, but the canned goods, snacks, and drinks weren’t past their expiration dates yet, so we mostly grabbed those.

Then we wandered around looking through the other stuff.

We didn’t need clothes or anything at the moment.

Maybe we’d come back when winter came□no, the winter stock was never going to arrive, huh?

“I can simply create clothing with mine ability to generate matter, if need be.”

“Yeah… It’s just food supplies that I’m worried about. You can drink my blood for sustenance, but that won’t cut it for me. If we keep going back and forth drinking each other’s blood, we’ll eventually run out of energy.”

What a predicament.

Self-sufficiency was surprisingly difficult.

I could probably prepare food using a gas stove, but the tanks would run out sooner or later—did we have a lifetime supply? Not likely.

And there wasn't all that much canned food, either.

What to do?

A vampire's lifespan is pointlessly long.

Didn't Shinobu say something to that effect at one point—that the majority of vampires die by suicide?

Not just the Shinobu from this timeline.

"The high we're currently feeling, the kind of inappropriate thrill and pounding excitement of being left on a deserted island," I submitted, "probably won't even last a week… How much preparation we can manage during this week of high motivation is going to dictate the direction of our new life as castaways."

"On the way home, ought we not stop by the bookstore and seek out tomes on survival? We must like as not abandon any pretense at a civilized lifestyle."

"I don't know, if the two of us can persevere for a while, maybe new life will appear at some point and evolve into human beings again, and rebuild civilization."

"I do not think that even vampires are that immortal."

"We won't live forever, eternally youthful and undying?"

"Such is merely rhetoric. We differ from zombies and ghosts, dead as they are. Never forget that we are yet alive."

"Oh… So my days of playing PS3 are over?"

"'Tis what I like about thee, that thy hopes for a new race of humans extend only to the development of the PS3… Yet whatever

happens, should such a new race appear, 'twould be but the blink of an eye before they went extinct once more, transformed into zombies."

"Oh…" That sucked. Humankind was not just down, but down for the count and not getting back up? "I've thought to myself before that Hanekawa made me who I am today—which is definitely true, but there's more to it than that. I'm who I am now because of Hachikuji, and you—and Senjogahara, Kanbaru, Sengoku, and Oshino. Of course, without my parents I'd never have been born, and if not for Karen and Tsukihi… Even my dealings with Kaiki taught me a lot, my battle with Kagenui changed my values—that's how it goes. This may be a super ordinary way to say it, but…I've been taking fate too lightly."

"Taking it—lightly."

"Fate is something we create together, and it was arrogant of me to think I could change it alone—it seems that way, at any rate."

"I still think it avails thee nothing to ponder it overmuch. Though 'tis pointless to tell thee not to. But thou didst tell me not to apologize. Therefore, I ask thee, too, to refrain as far as thou art able from remorse, or regret. Such remorse, such regrets, will avail thee nothing in the future—all we have left is each other, so to blame one another, or ourselves, as we live on through eternity would be the height of folly."

"Right, it'd be like 'The Salamander.'"

Maybe I was unfeeling.

This situation.

Maybe I needed to be blaming Shinobu more, blaming myself more than I was.

But, somehow.

Yes, somehow.

The scale was just too big for the mind to grasp—a town where

literally not a soul is to be seen during the day becoming infested with zombies at night was pure ridiculousness, and at the risk of being taken the wrong way, it all seemed like a joke to me.

History, fate, the world.

I just wasn't equipped to handle stuff of that order.

Becoming a vampire, time slipping.

I'm still only a high school student.

Fate.

Not to mention reality itself□I don't have the capacity to stand up to all that.

It was a lost cause.

"Shinobu."

"Aye."

"I don't know if it'll be a year down the line, or ten years, or what, but at some point I'll probably lose my grip and try to blame you for destroying the world. But when I do, I won't be in my right mind. So please don't take it to heart, just let it go. Please just placate me if I get hysterical."

"I understand," Shinobu nodded. Solemnly.

"Okay. So, if we don't need to buy clothes, then there's not much we do need. I guess human beings can get by with surprisingly little, if need be. What was it, 'Consider the lilies how they grow'? Though you and I are both half vampire. Anyway, what do you say we forget about the bookstore for the moment and borrow some educational materials from the high school on the way home?"

We'd do that.

Who knew if the high school, or the college I'd been planning on attending, was still even standing, but□thinking of what Hanekawa

and Senjogahara would say.

Not only was it pointless, it was a complete waste of time, nothing more than an escape from reality, but I wanted to continue studying for just a little while longer.

To me.

That was my summer homework.

Then “Hm?”

I stopped walking.

In front of a certain display case, on the third floor of the supermarket I wasn’t even putting things in my basket anymore and was just ambling along, but in front of that display case, in an area with summertime merchandise, I stopped.

Stopped and

“What is it, my lord?”

“Nothing, just…”

Without being fully aware of what I was doing, I reached out towards the display case and took it in my hand. Come to think of it, I hadn’t done so once this summer actually, for much longer than that.

So.

“There’s something I want to try.”

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The thing awaiting my outstretched hand was a set of fireworks.

And not sparklers like the kind you hold in your hand, proper fireworks that you launch into the sky. Truthfully, I would have preferred something even larger, which I probably could have found if I searched in earnest (if I scoured the yellow pages for a pyrotechnician, for instance), but it seemed reasonable to try this first.

What was I planning? Well, fireworks have no utility other than being set off, do they? I wasn't considering using the energy of those fireworks to travel into the past or anything.

I was just thinking□they could serve as a signal.

A distress signal.

Well, maybe not exactly□but they could serve in place of a signal flare to say, I'm here, there's a person here.

Here we go with another manga reference by way of explanation, but I'm pretty sure that in The Great Adventure of Dai, the heroes do something similar in the ruins of Papnika. They use an actual signal flare, but I wasn't feeling so zealous that I was going to find some military warehouse to raid for supplies. Fireworks would have to do.

"What wilt thou, by launching such a thing? Though 'tis a fine way to ornament summer's end□"

"It would really be something, wouldn't it, just the two of us enjoying the fireworks together."

If Shinobu wasn't actually suspicious of my behavior, which may have seemed overly carefree from a certain perspective, she at least

seemed to think it odd, so I gave a proper explanation.

“At first glance the world appears to be in total ruin, but possibly, just possibly, couldn’t someone have survived? You know… someone living in hiding, in fear of the multitudes of zombies who appear at night.”

“Hmm…I take thy point,” Shinobu concurred. “Methinks the chances are incredibly slim, but…might it yet be possible? If a soul but waited out the few days of vampiric proliferation which began on the night of June the fourteenth…’twould not be impossible to survive the subsequent zombie infestation. Their numbers are great, but their movements sluggish. And their senses of sight and smell appear to be inferior to those of humankind—indeed, a few people… nay, ’twould not be surprising if a few thousand, maybe tens of thousands, had survived, scattered here and there across the globe.”

“I don’t think that’s realistic.” Not wanting to cling to any outlandish hopes, and probably right not to, my tone might’ve been more flippant than necessary. “I don’t believe anyone could live through the transformation of all humankind into vampires, and their subsequent zombified nightstalking. After they end up in that form, those zombies recall only their goal to destroy humanity, right? Then they couldn’t allow anyone to survive—oh, I’ve been meaning to ask, if people who get bitten by vampires turn into vampires, what happens to people who get bitten by zombies?”

“They turn into zombies rather than vampires. And walk the night—slaves to my dear departed self.”

“Okay—then it’s settled. Here goes nothing.”

“Here goes nothing, indeed. Even so,” said Shinobu, looking at the fireworks in my hand, “the flare and report of such commercially available fireworks will be limited in their reach?”

“Sure, but it’s all we’ve got. So just think of it as a regular old fireworks display.”

“Hmm.”

I don’t know if Shinobu actually thought it was worth trying, or just hopeless, but at least she didn’t object.

And after all.

Given the massive amount of time we had to kill from here on out, why object to a little diversion?

She may even have been excited about a fireworks display.

I settled on that unpronounceable park as the site since there was a lot of open space there.

And not much in the way of playground equipment.

Speaking of which, even eleven years in the past, the park hadn’t offered much in the way of playground equipment so in that place’s case, at least, they hadn’t been removed for safety reasons.

The ruins of the abandoned cram school would have some nostalgic resonance, permeated with memories as it was, but the area was so overgrown that we’d start a fire if anything went awry.

As much as it was abandoned and about to collapse at any moment, I still couldn’t forgive myself if I burned down that building packed so full of everyone’s memories.

Unthinkable.

The flames might be more visible than a few fireworks, but even the Grocer Oshichi wouldn’t pull such a pyromaniac stunt.

So the only candidates I could come up with were the school grounds and that park. I opted in favor of the latter based purely on proximity.

Or maybe out of emotional investment.

“If it shall be so, my lord, there is yet one aspect of the matter on which I would have thee heed my counsel.”

“Hm? Counsel?”

“Fret not, the distress signal itself is well and good.” Shinobu paused for a while before continuing, “I cannot believe ’twould be so, but…surely thou dost not intend to launch these fireworks at night.”

“Oh.”

“How wouldst thou amuse thyself with them in the midst of a town overrun with zombies?”

“…”

I couldn’t, could I.

An excellent point.

How could I purposely send up fireworks from our position when it would call them right to us?

It would be suicidal.

“Then the fireworks display is canceled, I guess. Sure, I wanted to use it as a distress signal, but I also thought it might be fun□”

That said, how should we spend the night? It wouldn’t be safe inside the house□they say true vampires can’t enter someone else’s home without permission, but these were zombies we were dealing with.

They might just blithely ignore that rule□and even if it did apply to them, a Karen or Tsukihi zombie would still be able to enter the Araragi home.

If Karen was a zombie, was she still strong?

If Tsukihi was a zombie…um?

What happened when she became a zombie?

I mean, she was a…

Hrmm?

“Nay, my lord, there is no need to cancel the fireworks display outright. I merely wished to suggest that if we cannot hold it at night, we might hold it during the day.”

“…”

Well, she was right, but still.

Vampires are weak against the sun, so they can’t do much except at night, likewise the zombies—she was absolutely right, but still.

“That’s not quite how I had pictured it…”

But with our safety in mind, maybe there was no other choice.

Even if we braved the risk and sent up the fireworks at night, any survivors in the vicinity probably wouldn’t come out while the zombies were strutting their stuff—

Perhaps setting them off during the day was the right idea after all.

“At least,” I said, looking up at the heavens. Today again, the sky was crystal clear and blue, and the sun was blinding—bright enough to really burn. “At least let’s wait for a day that’s cloudy enough for the fireworks to be visible a little bit farther off…”

The plan just kept deviating more and more from normal fireworks, I realized as I spoke. Choosing to set them off during the day, and actively hoping for bad weather… That was truly perverse.

“Well, since searching for survivors is the number one goal, so be it,” I concluded, with a certain bitterness, but also with unadulterated anticipation at the prospect of lighting off some fireworks for the first time in forever.

Even in this ruined world.

And that anticipation became reality three days later—dates didn’t mean much in a ruined world, but according to the calendar it was Saturday, August twenty-sixth.

An ideally overcast day.

The kind of wonderfully overcast day that promised rain if we waited any longer, the clouds having gone from gray to black—perfectly suited for fireworks, better than anyone could hope for…

During the intervening three days, Shinobu and I had slept in the Araragi residence all day long, and chatted away in the sky all night long. While she'd regained a great deal of her power, staying aloft for a whole night did seem to be something of a burden to her, so we were probably going to have to work out another plan sooner rather than later—but I will report here that those night flights with Shinobu were really amazing.

Three days and three nights.

What Shinobu and I chatted about during that time shall remain secret.

And three days later.

The day of the fireworks display.

Thinking back, I'd always left it to Karen and Tsukihi, so this was actually the first time I was setting these things off. I stabilized them with some handy stones as per the instructions, lit the fuse with a lighter, and got the hell out of there.

I was worried that they might be too damp or too old to work properly, having sat on the shelf for quite some time, but as luck would have it—well, these were fireworks that even grade schoolers could use (under their parents' supervision, of course), so I couldn't possibly bungle it—the coronas of light blossomed splendidly.

True, it was daytime.

And it was cloudy. Though it was actually too dull of a display to be termed splendid—

"Tamayaaaaaa!"

"Kagiyaaaaaa!"

“By the by,” asked Shinobu, “why do they cry that out at a fireworks display?”

“Both Tamaya and Kagiya were fireworks shops during the Edo period.”

“Ah ha! So they were, so they were. I heard rumors of them whilst overseas.”

“Why does she pretend to know everything…”

“But why cry out ‘tamaya, kagiya’ at fireworks made by other shops?”

“Well, it’s like back in the day when people called a portable tape player a Walkman no matter what brand it was.”

“Walkmen. They recently went out of production, did they not? Aye, they did seem to be all the rage. But how does that work out for the other shops?”

“Probably lights a fire under their asses.”

“Works for me.”

Amidst that sort of banter.

We lit off one firework after another.

Every single one from the display shelf at the supermarket. We thought of dividing them up and doing a few smaller events, but since it was probably meaningless in the first place, we didn’t feel like going through the whole rigmarole more than once.

If we were going to do it, we might as well go all out.

As all out as we could with such dull fireworks.

“Tamayaaaaaa!”

“Kagiyaaaaaa!”

I said every single one, but given that it was a provincial

supermarket, there hadn't been that many to begin with, and in the end the whole event was over in under an hour.

Over all too soon.

As unnecessary as it might be, let me give you a quick rundown of the visuals here: Shinobu and I were wearing traditional Japanese attire for the occasion. You've gotta wear yukata to a fireworks display, we figured, so it was a conventional, not to say an almost mischievous dress code, but Shinobu in her little-blond-girl-in-a-yukata guise gave me an unexpected lump in my throat.

"…Thou canst leave out the little girl part."

"I told you not to read my thoughts!"

"'Tis novel to see thee in a yukata as well. Thou art always dressed in a hoodie or in thy school uniform."

"Not always!"

"Well, everyone, are you popular?"

"Stop imitating the Super-Popular Class President."

"'Tis only a promo spot, yet 'tis pretty cool."

"Sure…"

It was impossible to ignore.

That vibe.

By the way, the yukata Shinobu was wearing owed to her ability to create matter, but I'd found mine in the house. At some point my Japanese clothing-obsessed little sister Tsukihi had picked it out for me.

As for the fact that I was wearing my school shoes, let's not be too fussy.

"Man," I said, "it does feel good every once in a while."

“This ought to make up for thy exam prep preventing thee from attending the summer festival.”

“Without food stalls and Bon dancing, though, it’s a pretty lonely festival□well, wanna wait here until nightfall and see what happens?”

“Aye.”

“No matter what, let’s not get our hopes up. Again, I have a hard time believing anyone could still be alive with the town this way, and even if, hope against hope, anyone actually escaped the menace and is living in hiding somewhere, I have a hard time believing those fireworks would draw them out. When humanity has been annihilated by vampires, it’s only natural to be wary. It’d be normal to expect a trap. And□”

“Enough.”

A grinding sensation.

On my foot.

It was Shinobu.

Since proper wooden sandals were strapped to her feet, I took a huge amount of damage.

“Aaaaaaagghhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

“Canst not be so painful as to warrant such a shriek.” Shinobu rolled her eyes as she removed her foot. “’Tis no good to expect too much, but a surfeit of pessimism will accomplish naught. If thou hast the time to lament the futility of it, instead think upon how best to communicate with any survivors who possess the nerve to answer thy summons. It may not be only middle school girls with whom thou must deal.”

“You’re right.” It was certainly more forward-looking.

“What wilt thou do if some rough-and-tumble codger in a sleeveless shirt appears?”

“I’ll run away as fast as I can.”

“At least thou art honest…”

“As fast as a vampire can.”

“’Tis that distasteful to thee…”

“I’d run from anyone who wasn’t a middle school girl.”

“…”

Thou art too honest, even with no one around, Shinobu scolded as she stepped on my foot again.

Grinding her sandal into it again.

Geez, it really hurt.

But after that, we□what can I say, we didn’t run away.

We managed to get by without running away.

We passed the time sitting on a bench in Unpronounceable Park, Shinobu cradled in my lap, chatting idly and dozing off occasionally beneath a sky even now pregnant with rain□and.

We got by without running away.

Not because no one came.

Someone did come.

And it wasn’t some rough-and-tumble codger in a sleeveless shirt.

Though neither was it a middle school girl.

It was.

026

“……nkk!”

The same feeling as the other night—of being surrounded by the time I realized it. To be more precise, I didn’t until we were surrounded and it was almost too late.

Without a hint of their presence.

Without a sound.

Without a chance of escape, too, of course—Shinobu and I were suddenly surrounded by vast numbers of zombies as we sat on a bench in that ambiguously named park.

Human corpses, their flesh sloughing off their bones like mud.

Vampires reduced to shadows of their former selves, their flesh sloughing off their bones like mud.

Already dead.

And for that reason, no longer able to die.

The town’s residents—though absolutely indistinguishable one from the other, for all I knew, acquaintances of mine were mixed into the zombie horde.

Given how many there were, the chances were pretty good.

The time we were surrounded at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine didn’t even compare.

There were easily over a hundred of them.

Well over two hundred.

Three hundred?

Five hundred?

Maybe a thousand? No, that couldn't be.

But there were almost that many.

The park was already so buried in zombies jostling and rubbing against one another that, even under the circumstances, I found myself worrying that the individuals would start melding into each other.

Well, right.

I shouldn't under the circumstances.

Because we might be joining them they.

Those zombies who used to be human, who used to be Shinobu's thralls.

They were looking at us with stares that didn't even qualify as vacant.

And gradually.

Not to say sluggishly they were getting closer.

"Wha? Why are they…"

In a panic I looked up at the sky.

Had the twilight hour passed while I hadn't been paying attention while I was getting cozy with Shinobu, holding her in my arms? Had night taken us unawares?

By their clock by aberration time.

Had night already fallen?

"Of all the careless I was only trying to have a little fun fondling some ribs!"

“To die for such a reason far surpasses carelessness.”

Then, Shinobu quietly showed me the watch.

The hands didn’t even read four o’clock yet—the twilight hour was still a long way off, let alone nightfall.

So how come.

They were here, now—

“…It seems the fireworks did somehow summon them to us,” Shinobu said.

Even she seemed flustered by this turn of events—which was perfectly understandable.

This wasn’t like the other day. We were surrounded on all sides as before, and this time we couldn’t escape into the sky.

Shinobu could only fly at night. What’s more, her vampiric level had declined somewhat—even if she sprouted wings, they’d be nothing more than a decorative design element.

“Hnh,” she grunted. “It seems that our fireworks were quite the distress signal after all.”

“How can this be… Even if they’re zombies now, these guys used to be vampires, right? They shouldn’t be able to act while the sun is still out—”

I thought.

They shouldn’t be able to.

“And indeed, they cannot. Look, their movements are more sluggish than before, and their melting skin in an even more dire state.”

“Um…”

Now that Shinobu mentioned it—no, even though she did, I couldn’t discern any fine distinctions in the stages of zombie

decay—however, the impression that the individuals were melding into one another did substantiate her claim.

Their movements were so slow that they couldn't avoid one another—and their skin, their flesh, was melting, more like water than like mud.

"The strain of operating in daylight is clearly showing—likely…" Peering upward, at a sky that presented us with no escape route at the moment, Shinobu said, "this cloudy weather is to blame. Those heavy clouds are blocking the sun's rays—just enough for the zombies to be active."

"……nkk!"

It had completely backfired!

Waiting for the right weather for the fireworks display…had backfired!

Variations in the strength of the sun's rays certainly had an effect on my physical condition as well, even as a pseudo-vampire—sure, they had an effect, but come on!

Speaking of which, there was one time during my days as a vampire that I did expose myself to direct sunlight—but although my body burst into flames, the burnt parts healed thanks to my powers of regeneration. It's not like I was burnt to a crisp in the blink of an eye—and the parts of the zombies that were melting like water before my very eyes likewise seemed to be healing up.

And they didn't even seem to be feeling any pain.

However—

"'Just enough' sounds right," I observed. "They're barely able to move. Why push themselves so far during daytime…"

"Like as not 'tis thanks to the fireworks—the directive to destroy human beings is inscribed upon their brains—nay, upon their instincts. Therefore—they will seek to destroy humans if they can, even should it cause them harm to do so."

So their original order lived on like a stubborn program—even without the vampire master who issued the order.

Or.

Even though one splinter of the two-man cell they were trying to destroy was herself that vampire master.

“So, let me get this straight,” I said. “Our existence was revealed because I sent up a few fireworks, and hearing them—do they actually hear? These zombies were kind enough to assemble even though it’s daytime, when it harms them to do so… Is that about right?”

“Aye.”

“Wow…”

Well, this wasn’t the time to be wowed.

What were we gonna do?

Our here-goes-nothing distress signal had worked like a charm—this went well past you reap what you sow and on to plain old self-destruction.

Felt like one backfire after another.

Koyomi Araragi at his best.

“What will we do…my lord?”

“Whatever we do…first things first, we have to get out of here…”

I tried to fall back in the face of the threat advancing on us from the front, but there was a bench behind me, and behind it the same threat was advancing on us from the rear.

We were stymied.

Completely hemmed in.

At an intersection where all the lights were red.

“…If you drank enough of my blood to max yourself out real quickly, could you fly?”

“Were I alone. ’Twould be impossible to soar holding another.”

“Then...”

“In other words, no.”

I do not have the option of fleeing alone, Shinobu refused firmly.

Her words left no room for discussion.

The sentiment made me happy, but there was no time to get emotional because however slow their movements, the zombies were closing the distance little by little, very little by very little, solemnly, inexorably.

It wasn’t even a state of equilibrium.

It was a countdown to execution.

I said, “Well, then I guess we have no choice but to fight.”

“It seems so. Indeed, we cannot meekly allow them to drink our blood and yet, ’twill be no mean feat. As their powers are suppressed during the day, so are ours.”

And worst of all, added Shinobu, scowling at the surrounding zombies, though she knew it made no difference.

“They are my thralls.”

“…”

“Though they have transformed from vampires into zombies, they have not lost that original, fundamental power and we cannot hope for victory against numbers such as these. We must attempt to slip through the cracks.”

“There are no cracks.”

“Indeed.”

“Well, I can’t quite fly, but I can at least jump, so I’ll pick you up and run away across their heads.”

Surfing, using the zombies as the wave—and running until the wave broke on the far shore of the horde.

I felt no small amount of guilt at the thought of kicking a bunch of zombies whom I probably used to know (and who became zombies because of us), and it was unclear whether the whole thing was realistically possible in the first place (we might get pulled down at some point before we broke free, no matter how sluggish they were)—

But there was no other way out of this crisis.

“Okay, since that’s the plan, no time like the present. We go on three.”

“Understood,” Shinobu assented.

“One, two—”

Three!

With that, Shinobu leapt up onto my hip, and I put my arm around her back and took off running, all in the same instant—

But.

Our split-second timing, and kamikaze-like determination, all got completely derailed.

Because the second my foot touched the ground, it started to rain.

A drop landed on my head.

Causing thoughts to start racing through my head, exacerbating my sense of urgency—if the cloudy weather turned into rain, the sun might be blocked even more fully, allowing the zombies to power up even further—and I might slip trying to run across their heads.

However.

However, what was falling from the sky wasn't rain at all.

What was falling from the sky was□

"…Rice?"

Rice.

It was□white rice.

Not rain, but a vast quantity of white rice was falling out of the sky□and simultaneously□

"□□□

But wasn’t a zombie.

She.

The girl who remained, clutching an empty rice sack, the end ripped open, under either arm was not a zombie, nor was she a vampire.

Nor, of course, was she a ghost

She was a living human being.

“I have no idea why, but they seem to be weak against rice. When you shower them with it like that, it seems to drive them away for a while.”

I don’t want it to go to waste, though, so please give me a hand gathering it back up, she requested.

To which I couldn’t reply.

She was tall.

Her black hair, long enough to fall to her waist, was gathered at the nape of her neck for ease of movement. She was the picture of health, with her wide eyes and long eyelashes, her smooth skin and plush lips. She wore not a trace of makeup.

She had on cargo pants and a tank-top that emphasized her chest, over which she wore a rugged military jacket. On her feet were sneakers so unstylish that it made me feel uneasy to see a girl wearing them, but all the same, considering how durable and comfortable they appeared, mobility was her top fashion priority.

She wore a mountain-climbing backpack, the type that’s secured at the waist with a belt and doesn’t sit right against the body. She must’ve been carrying the two ten-kilo bags of rice in there.

“So,” she said. I saw that she had a Swiss army knife at the ready in her right hand, not out of caution, it seemed, but simply as though it was standard decorum. The blade was pointed down, rather than towards us, but “Was it you two who were shooting off fireworks

here a little while ago?”

“Y-Yes, it was,” I stammered in reply.

I didn’t stammer because my interlocutor was wielding a Swiss army knife. We sent up those fireworks because we had nothing to lose, without knowing if anyone was around; and an actual human survivor had shown up, and what’s more, saved us with a rice shower, yet I hadn’t given any thought at all to communication methods, and things were tense even though we’d narrowly escaped a besieging horde of zombies—but that wasn’t why either.

Nope.

I didn’t stammer due to any of that.

“Wow, okay. Then I’m glad I came to check it out. That was a dangerous thing you did—if they get up the gumption, those guys can move even during the day. What was that supposed to be, a distress signal? It won’t work, no one will come. They’ll just think it’s some kind of trap, or a warning signal.”

Saying this, she slipped the Swiss army knife back into its sheath, probably having judged “no danger” after talking with us face-to-face—then smiled.

As if to put us at ease.

Well, of course.

From her viewpoint—we were kids.

Wanting to be kind to us like that.

Wanting to help us out after our terrible blunder with the fireworks—perhaps it was only natural.

Sure.

Just like I did for her in the past—

“I… My name is Koyomi Araragi,” I said in a trembling

voice—totally unable to hide my agitation. But I forged ahead and asked her.

Just like I once did.

“What might your name be?”

“It’s Miss Mayoi Hachikuji.”

That was how she introduced herself.

Yup.

I’d asked—but didn’t need her to tell me.

I’d known from the start.

Hahaha.

You really can recognize people.

Even after eleven years—even when they’re eleven years older.

Even though her appearance, her voice, and her manner of speaking were all completely different.

Even though she didn’t bite me.

I recognized her at a single glance.

“So…you’re alive, then.”

You’re.

Alive.

Not dead.

Not turned into an aberration.

Alive.

I let go the arm that was holding Shinobu to my side—in truth, I desperately wanted to embrace Hachikuji the same way, but as she was now a grown woman, I couldn't give in to that impulse.

And either way.

I couldn't keep calling her plain old Hachikuji without an honorific, could I?

Because now—I was the younger one.

"You've been alive—ever since."

Without fate correcting for it.

Since that Mother's Day eleven years ago, when you got to see Mrs. Tsunade—without losing your young life the next day, or the day after that—not to mention.

Surviving Shinobu Oshino's plan to obliterate humankind. You stayed alive right up until this moment.

You did it—you lived.

"'Tis difficult to readily believe…not only that anyone hath survived at all, but that the survivor should be thy friend," Shinobu, sounding surprised, muttered under her breath—seeing how she was clinging to my side even when I'd let go, I guess she really was surprised.

She must have thought it was an impossible coincidence.

But if that was the case, her statement was a little off base—because.

In this timeline, Koyomi Araragi and Mayoi Hachikuji didn't know each other at all—Koyomi Araragi died before he could meet Mayoi Hachikuji on Mother's Day.

They did meet once, eleven years previously, when he saved her from a traffic accident, but—there was no way she remembered that

passing encounter.

Indeed, Miss Hachikuji looked baffled by our surprise.

She asked, “Is something wrong?” as though she was concerned with an expression that the young Mayoi Hachikuji I knew would never wear in a million years. “You look like you’re about to cry. Was it that frightening?”

Flustered, I fibbed, “Well, you see… We were just startled. We’d taken it for granted that everyone was dead, so we are, um, delighted to meet another living person.”

“Oh? You’re wrong about that. There are a lot. Of living people, I mean. Though I’m the only one left around here… Huh, so you haven’t run into anyone else so far? If that’s true, then you two are the ones who’ve done a hell of a job of surviving,” Miss Hachikuji said, skipping admiration and going straight to astonishment. “So that’s why you went setting off those fireworks so carelessly.”

“…”

Humanity hadn’t been swept aside so easily, it seemed they hadn’t just lain down and died.

Well, that was gratifying.

And it’d be a little too convenient by anyone’s standards if the only surviving human in this ruined world were Mayoi Hachikuji.

Too serendipitous.

By anyone’s standards.

Shinobu’s prediction that there must be tens of thousands of survivors around the world might have been a bulls’-eye after all.

“Seems like those zombies are taking down the survivors one after another, though I’ve steadily been losing contact with everyone. And I’ve nearly died any number of times myself.”

Of all the things for her to say.

Without a trace of the tragic bravado you might expect, too.

So resolute.

But it was no surprise.

The young lady that I knew—of course she'd become a levelheaded, dependable adult when she grew up.

"Sorry, but did I catch that?" she asked as I stood there unable to recover from the shock—unsure if I should be taking this turn of events jubilantly or what. "Koyomi Araragi?"

"…Right. Let me see. 'A' like ass-kisser, two 'ra's like in Radio Shack, and 'gi' as in 'give a man a fish'… Then 'Koyomi' as in calendar," I explained all in a fluster, presuming that she wanted to know how my name was written.

"So you're Araragi-kun."

Then I'm glad I came, she nodded.

Strangely—satisfied.

"…"

Huh?

From her reaction, it seemed like she already knew my name—no, no way.

We lived in different areas, and we were different ages.

If Hachikuji didn't die without seeing Mrs. Tsunade on that Mother's Day eleven years ago and hence never turned into an aberration—then the two of us had no reason ever to come in contact—so the me of this timeline.

Would've been killed—would've died.

Without ever meeting Hachikuji.

Without ever encountering Hachikuji.

So how could she know my name?

“It’s unbelievable, actually meeting like this. But then again, maybe it shouldn’t be such a surprise. Maybe it all makes sense.” With this remark, Miss Hachikuji took off the backpack she was carrying and began rummaging around inside. “Wow, so there really is a Koyomi Araragi. And he did say you’d have a blond girl with you.”

“H-He?”

“Said you’d probably have a blond girl with you, yes.”

“Who said that?!”

No.

Hang on—I can guess, can’t I?

I knew only one guy who’d say something like that.

Who’d say something so specific, so incisive—I knew him all too well.

Knew that frivolous man in the Hawaiian shirt.

“Well, since you ask, it was the same person who told me that a rice shower would be effective against these zombies, a guy called Oshino—and he gave me a letter for you.”

Upon which.

Miss Hachikuji handed me a newish-looking envelope.

027

Yo, Araragi.

I've been waiting for you.

I can always count on you to keep me waiting, though, can't I?

Does this qualify as "it's been a while," I wonder? After all, this me and the me you know are completely different people, as are you and the Araragi I know. Or maybe more strangers than different people. Though of course you're still you, and I'm still me.

I thought it best to entrust this letter to Hachikuji. I'm praying it reaches you□if you haven't given up on meeting people, even with the world in this state, then I'm pretty sure it will reach you in the end.

Because it's the threads binding people together that weave the tapestry of fate.

But you know how easy it is for me to get carried away, and if I keep getting mired in idle chatter, I'm going to run out of stationery before I know it□paper has become a precious commodity these days.

I'll try to be brief.

So briefly hear me out.

To be honest, I don't know for certain what you've been doing, what path you've followed or where it's led you, nor what you might be thinking□you always talked about what a perceptive guy I am, but even I don't know everything. I was just showing off for you youngsters, and the fact is that the world is positively littered with things I don't understand.

A different fate, for instance? I've got nothing.

A different world? No idea.

Though maybe it would be better to call it a different route.

For the gamer generation, the gamer mind.

So I want to let you know at the outset that the information I'm about to dispense will likely include any number of mistakes, and plenty of errors. Please amend those yourself.

You can do that much, can't you?

Because you're the Koyomi Araragi who succeeded.

The Araragi from my route, by which I mean this route, sadly failed failed to establish a constructive relationship with Shinobu and threw his life away in vain.

Not a bad end, a dead end.

That in and of itself is a tragedy.

I feel terrible about my friend dying right under my nose. Which is not to say that the Araragi of this route held back at all.

Don't be disappointed in him.

He gave it everything he had.

He risked everything, time and time again.

Same as you.

Of course, I'm writing based on the premise that there is a you, an Araragi, for me to write to to be frank, this is something of a gamble.

I'm betting on the possibility of an Araragi who forged a positive relationship with Shinobu, and my gambler's heart is thumping in my chest.

Not that I'm much of a gambler.

Might be your retort when you read this?

But it's not a hopeless wager.

In fact I think it's a sure bet, the odds are maybe 8-2 in favor. Good enough to wager everything I've got, and my life to boot. Because I refuse to believe that there isn't at least one route where you succeeded.

I want you to take a look at Hachikuji, who I assume is standing before you now—it seems that a mysterious high school student saved her life when she was a little girl.

She says that on a certain Mother's Day, while en route to visit the home of her mother, from whom Hachikuji had been separated for life by family circumstances (though maybe that's an exaggeration)—she was crossing against the light and was shoved out of the way to safety just as she was about to be hit by a truck.

As I understand it, the incident occurred while she was running away from some sort of deviant who had flipped her skirt and was pursuing her—but the fact that afterwards that high school student helped the lost child to find her mother's house seems to have made the deeper impression.

She seems terribly regretful that, because she was shy around strangers at the time, she didn't utter a word of thanks to the high school student.

Though maybe that was only natural.

Given that the high school student seemed a bit funny in the head, talking to his shadow and all.

I had already heard this story before Golden Week, when all that stuff was happening with Missy Class President (I expect all that stuff happened in your route as well). At the time, I was going around town collecting tales of aberrations.

That's when I became acquainted with Hachikuji.

And it wasn't just her. All kinds of people remembered that high school student.

Hachikuji said that he was alone when they met—but according to most accounts, he seemed to have formed a two-man cell with a blond girl (sometimes a little girl, sometimes a middle school girl who seemed like she'd returned from living abroad).

Really, all kinds of people.

Remembered that mysterious high school student.

An office worker who had been a middle school girl at the time, a recently retired (on account of marriage) policewoman who had been stationed in a police box at the time, not to mention the truck driver who claims he was the one who almost hit the kid.

And even those who didn't have such direct contact with him could hardly forget the sight of a high school student walking around carrying a little blond girl in his arms like a koala.

Sounds like the town was in a tiny bit of an uproar at the time.

And why not?

How else could it be?

He was too mysterious, his identity just too secret.

There were even tales of him hiding behind utility poles, staking out the homes of ordinary citizens—though these were nothing but unfounded rumors, of course.

Urban legends.

Chinese whispers.

Campfire tales.

And then it hit me.

Spring break was over, so by then I already knew both Koyomi

Araragi and the little girl that Shinobu Oshino had become—not that Shinobu ever set foot outside the abandoned building in which I made my happy little home.

Nor was she embedded in your shadow.

And yet.

It goes without saying that it was the two of you.

You two, for your part, probably think you pulled it off without a hitch. But just like in sci-fi novels, however hard you might try not to affect anyone, or history, or fate, it's impossible not to leave some kind of trace in people's memories.

The effect people can have on history—even just one person, or one thing—is terrifyingly profound.

Granted, we may not remember someone we simply pass by on the street.

We may not even be aware of them as part of the scenery, as anything more than a breeze.

Like how we forget some of our elementary school classmates when we enter middle school—and forget some of our middle school classmates when we enter high school—but even if we can't recall the fact that we were in the same room as them, that memory nonetheless remains buried in our hearts.

Even if it doesn't remain in the mind, it remains in the heart.

And that has to influence our lives.

History. The world.

Your traces did remain in this world.

Scattered though they were.

And I managed to reassemble them.

As ghost stories.

As aberration lore.

Naturally I don't know all the specifics, but I'll bet that that Araragi□not the Araragi from this route, the one I know, but you, the Araragi who is reading this letter□performed a time slip to save Hachikuji, yes? You used Shinobu's power to leap into the past to save Hachikuji? In your route, Hachikuji must have died in that traffic accident, and it was only after her death that you got to know her, so you took pity on her, and yes, you tried to change the past.

You don't have to hide it.

You don't have to be ashamed.

I don't even blame you for the time travel itself.

In fact, I've never had the slightest urge to blame you.

If you think that you brought the world to ruin by saving Hachikuji, you've got another think coming.

You're wildly off base on that one.

It may well have been an important factor, but underlying causes only go so far. Because the Araragi, or me, or the Hanekawa of this route should have been able to find a way around it.

Not that your effect on history wasn't colossal.

But we, who after all wield the same colossal power to influence events, should have been able to do something about your colossal influence.

And while I did tell Shinobu that it was best not to attempt time travel, I never expected every single route's Shinobu to abide by that.

Especially.

A Shinobu who had a positive relationship with you□

I was pretty sure that if something went down, you'd avail yourselves of that option.

Though I doubt you would possibly use it for so cockamamie a reason as not having finished your summer homework, like you were Nobita or something.

How you holding up?

Still with me?

If you're tired of reading, how about I throw in a classic Oshino joke right about here?

Okaaay, then let's continue on.

Your life-or-death endeavor paid off, and as you can see, Hachikuji is still alive□the thing I want you to realize, however, is that this Hachikuji is not the same Hachikuji you know.

I'm not talking about the difference between being alive and being dead.

She's the Hachikuji from another route.

My own inimitable analysis of the urban legends you two have become leads me to believe that you've got some misguided notions regarding traveling in time.

I did try to explain it properly to Shinobu, but it seems that she wasn't really listening.

In your route either.

What can you do?

She probably turned a deaf ear to what I had to say in every single route, at least on this subject.

What I want to emphasize first, at the very outset, in a big ol' voice,

is the clear-cut truth that it is absolutely impossible to alter fate through time travel.

Fate can be altered.

It can be altered by a person's thinking.

But it cannot be altered by time travel.

Because time travel to the past, or at least the type of time travel to the past Shinobu carried out, is not travel within the space-time continuum□it's nothing more or less than travel to another continuum altogether.

It's not movement from the future to the past, but movement from one world to another.

Movement from one route to another.

I know I risk making this even more confusing by saying this, but for you two, this timeline, this ruined Earth, is a parallel world.

A different world.

So rest easy, my successful Araragi.

And my successful Shinobu.

Your world is plugging along just fine, totally unruined.

You think a world in which you succeeded could go down the tubes? Ridiculous.

There is a world still waiting there for you, Araragi, in which the worst thing you have to worry about is exam prep.

Thank goodness, right?

But I'm betting you won't get it if all I tell you is the upshot, Araragi, so let me explain the whole thing from the beginning.

It's really not that complicated.

First, I want you to imagine infinite worlds.

Vast quantities of worlds, lined up side by side.

Parallel worlds.

Parallel routes.

I think it'll help if you picture the roads around Nagoya.

We'll call the world where you and Shinobu have forged a positive relationship Route A, and we'll call this ruined world Route B—no, if we do that you'll start to think that the number of worlds is finite, so how about we insert a bit of distance and call this world Route X.

You warped with the intention of leaping back into the past—eleven years into the past, of Route A. Eleven years is nothing more than a guess, but the you who appears in the urban legends seems to have been wearing your school uniform, so I assume you warped while you were still in high school.

If you got held back, that's a different story, of course.

But where you ended up wasn't eleven years into the past of Route A, it was eleven years into the past of Route X. And, to put it plainly, when you crossed routes, the concept of time lost all meaning.

Time has no meaning across continua.

Imagine it like crossing diagonally at a pedestrian scramble—but then, once you had achieved your goal, your movement was vertical, leaving the past of Route X and arriving eleven years later in the same route—in other words, in this present.

When traveling to the future, it's possible to stay within a given route—maybe you've heard about this from Shinobu? That traveling to the past consumes more energy than traveling to the future, or is harder, or whatever…

Now, as to why you two ended up in Route X in the first place—why you chose this "ruined world" route out of all the limitless

possibilities: it's probably because, out of all the limitless worlds, this world is just about the only "Mayoi Hachikuji Survives" world.

I can imagine where Shinobu might have created the time tunnel—probably at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine. Bingo, eh? That shrine where you exposed Sengoku to all the world in her school swimsuit.

I assume Shinobu used the torii there.

Because if she didn't use the energy there, there's no way little-girl Shinobu could effect a cross-dimensional jump.

In my route, I rigged up something there to absorb the spiritual energy so it couldn't be used for such purposes, but the me in the route where you and Shinobu have a positive relationship probably wouldn't have been so cautious.

Thinking about it from a more holistic perspective, however, I was probably leaving you, leaving both of you, room to choose whether or not you would exploit the spiritual energy of that place, as part of my ideology of balance.

And when you passed through the torii, you were probably only half listening to what Shinobu was telling you, am I right?

So you let some extraneous thoughts slip in.

For example—

Couldn't there be a world where fate allowed Hachikuji to live? That kind of thing.

If you, linked as you are to Shinobu, thought something like that, that thought would become your navigation system, and suddenly the reason you ended up in this Route X becomes all too clear.

Because while Shinobu works the pedals—you've got your hands on the wheel.

How's my reasoning?

Am I on the money?

Or could I be off base?

Well, if I am, then I'll leave it to you to make that part make sense.

Conversely, it wouldn't be untrue to say that it's precisely because you wished for Hachikuji's survival that this route exists per se□because if you hadn't rescued her after time warping eleven years into this past, she would have died then.

That's one case where even I wouldn't say that she just went and got saved on her own.

Your actions didn't destroy the world.

To be precise, your actions alone didn't destroy the world.

But saving Hachikuji is a triumph all your own□you should be proud.

Hahaha, this is a funny feeling… Knowing you're the Araragi from another route, somehow I don't mind praising you straight out. And not just because you're the Araragi who succeeded.

Which is why, Araragi.

If you're reading this letter□crap, when I say it like that, I'm probably already dead, but things being what they are, who knows? I might still be alive, though that doesn't matter□Shinobu's notion that travel to the past and travel to the future are the same, or similar, means that you guys mistakenly ended up here in this Route X.

And if I'm not mistaken, it also means that you guys will read this letter.

Because in setting the coordinates, and turning the steering wheel, I expect you wished to see "a world where Hachikuji and I never met."

Add onto that Shinobu's misapprehensions, and there's an extremely high probability that you're here, reading my letter.

I have the utmost confidence.

That this gamble has paid off.

So I've got a favor to ask of you, Araragi—and of you, Shinobu.

Would you mind saving the world?

I imagine you've already figured out that Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade brought this world to ruin, but do you realize that she is still alive, menacing what little remains of the human race?

Her suicide attempt failed.

She's alive.

Haha, did you think she killed herself, that she's already dead? Not that that isn't a perfectly reasonable assumption.

But she failed.

And it wasn't only her suicide attempt that was a failure—her attempt at creating thralls failed, too. It must have been her plan to bring the world to ruin by turning every single human being into a vampire, but you can't go about creating thralls that crudely.

Often when you try to turn someone into a vampire, it doesn't take, and they go into a frenzy.

Even for her—even for her, at the apex of her powers, some things are doable and some things aren't. I mean, up to this point she had only ever made two thralls including you in her entire life, so her ideal vision of vampires breeding like rabbits, of producing vast quantities of thralls lickety-split, was never going to work out in the first place.

Thralls are offshoots of the vampire who creates them, which is exactly why, for the same reason that cells degrade when the cloning process is repeated—her plan was bound to fail.

Producing failed vampires.

Those being the zombies that you've probably already seen. Pretty startling, no?

I'm guessing you may be laboring under the misapprehension that Shinobu succeeded at committing suicide, which is why her thralls went off the rails. But they're not successful products, they're failed ones.

They didn't go off the rails in the end, they were off the rails from the get-go.

That's the only reason there are any survivors left at all.

Humanity wouldn't have stood a chance against vampires.

But because it was zombies, we've barely managed to hang on for now.

Incidentally, Heartunderblade has been in hiding since her failed suicide attempt, and I'm on the hunt for her as we speak.

It goes without saying that she the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire, she who is known as the aberration slayer, the mightiest vampire is unstoppable, even on the brink of death.

There are no chinks in her armor to exploit like there were during spring break.

There is very little left that I can do. I intend to form a tag-team with our mutual friend the violent onmyoji, or maybe with the swindler, to launch one final suicide attack, but it will likely come to nothing.

The entire human race, zombified though they may be, are nonetheless not complete thralls of Heartunderblade. They are incomplete thralls, so to speak.

You could call these failed vampires "near vampires."

For which reason they can be restored.

Their humanity can be restored.

If, in the course of events, my team succeeds in defeating her—then the entire zombified human race, everyone who has been transformed into an aberration, will have their humanity restored, and this dead world can be revived.

Think I can call that hope?

It's certainly wildly optimistic.

Because when Heartunderblade gets serious.

When Heartunderblade goes crazy.

No one can stop her—no one but you two.

No one but you, because you are her.

But you're probably thinking, "There's no way we can stop a full-strength vampire when our own vampiric nature is so weak."

If so, that's fine.

I can't force you.

Because it's not your world that's ending.

But Araragi.

Take a look at the woman who delivered this letter to you.

That's the Hachikuji you rescued.

And she too will eventually be hunted down and killed by those zombies if the world goes on like this—because while she's clever, and strong, I've only instructed her in the bare essentials necessary for her to survive long enough to find you. She's just a normal human being, after all.

Won't it leave a bitter taste in your mouth, Araragi, to abandon a life you already saved once?

Asking you to save the world is just my own selfish request, so feel free to ignore it.

But Araragi.

At least save the girl standing there in front of you.

Your dear friend,

Mèmè Oshino

p.s.: By the by, in a startling turn of events, the Araragi here in Route X started dating Senjogahara, but who are you sweethearts with in your own world, I wonder?

028

“I was entrusted with handing over that letter to a boy by the name of Koyomi Araragi, provided he had a little blond girl with him—by that Oshino guy. I told him I didn’t believe that our local urban legend was actually true…but surprise, surprise, here you both are.”

I was expecting you to be wearing a school uniform and a dress, though, Miss Hachikuji said.

I guess our talk of a dress code and wearing yukata just barely did the trick—she didn’t seem to realize for the moment that Shinobu and I were the same urban legends who shoved her out of that crosswalk whom she had encountered as a young lady.

That was eleven years ago, after all, and her memory was probably hazy.

And nothing was leading her to suspect that the high school student of eleven years ago might still be a high school student today.

Who gets held back that many times?

“I first met Mister Oshino before the apocalypse, when he used to roam around town—that urban legend got him all fired up, which I thought was kind of weird, but now it makes sense. I guess it reminded him of someone.”

“…Seems that way,” I agreed noncommittally.

I did everything I could to meet her in the middle but couldn’t meet her eyes—I see.

Oshino.

Here, too—Oshino.

Was that sort of guy—that kind of guy.

The kind who sees through everything, no matter what route he's in—whose insights extend even to other routes.

Dude's still got it.

"Thank you very much, you've been a great help."

"What did the letter say?"

"You know… Rendezvous point, his last will and testament, that sort of thing."

"Huh…"

Somehow it seemed like Miss Hachikuji didn't quite buy it, but I guess she didn't think it proper to speculate about the contents of a private message, and she left it at that.

"Listen, Araragi. If you've got nowhere to go, why not come with me? I think I have it in me to look after two minors. I'm living in a nearby house at the moment—it's where my mother used to live, actually, back in the day. I don't have enough supplies to divvy up, but I could teach you the survival skills that Mister Oshino shared with me."

"…"

"And look—the fact is, I'm lonely all by myself."

"…I imagine."

She really has turned out great, I thought.

It was strange, thinking about her like that, when this Mayoi Hachikuji was older than me—but well, for her to end up like this.

It wasn't my world—but if this kind of world was possible?

It made me glad.

Even Oshino said it was me who'd done the saving—but in the end.

It felt like I was the one who'd been saved.

"You're very kind□Miss Hachikuji."

"No, not really. It's just, when I was a kid, a stranger was kind to me. So I try to be as kind as possible to strangers too, that's all."

"Oh□I see."

"So, what do you think? I can scrounge up some tea for you, at the very least."

"No□thank you anyway, it's a nice offer, but we have somewhere to be."

"You do?"

"Yes. And I'm sorry to say, we have to hurry. We didn't set off those fireworks as a means of communication, we were just having fun."

"That's… You're awfully weird, you know that?"

"Yes. I'm a weirdo."

It'll be okay. Soon you won't be lonely anymore, I promised, taking Shinobu by the hand.

Shinobu seemed like she was about to say something, but looking back and forth between Miss Hachikuji and me, for once the little motormouth of a girl□kept mum.

Maybe she read the mood.

Or maybe she read ahead a bit.

"Sorry it was a wasted trip," I apologized.

"Not at all, I'm glad I could deliver the letter I'd been entrusted with, but□hey." Miss Hachikuji stopped us as we were about to race out of the park. "Hey, Araragi-kun. Have we…met somewhere before?"

"Hmm. Well, maybe we passed each other on the street sometime or

something? They've got streets all throughout this great nation, after all."

"No, it isn't that…"

"We've never met. I'm just passing through," I said. Probably smiling. "But thank you so much, for being alive."

And just like that—without so much as a backward glance, I put the park in the rearview mirror.

Just like always, my mind was full of frivolous questions like—Now that she's grown up, has she learned how to read the name of that park?

"Did that truly sate thee, my lord?" Shinobu finally opened her mouth after we'd been walking for a while already. Like it was hard on her, she seemed about to trip on the cracked pavement at any moment. "Was there not more thou wouldst have liked to discuss with her?"

"Nope. Because in this world, she doesn't know me. It was only thanks to Oshino's good offices that we ran into each other—" I don't know what the exact odds had been, but I had a feeling it hadn't actually been much of a gamble on Oshino's part. For Hachikuji to meet the me from another route must have been a necessity. "I mean, this route's me and this route's Hachikuji never even met."

"Route, eh? I see, 'twas that sort of logic. So that's how we bested the difficulty of time travel into the past—put down in writing, 'tis easier to understand. 'Twould be even easier were it put into the form of a diagram."

"When it's turned into an analogy about intersections, you can't but get it. Well, it's on Oshino for not having helped you understand something so important."

We'd ended up taking one hell of a detour thanks to him.

Or rather it had been futile from the start.

Returning to the past to do my summer homework wouldn't have done any good.

I'd have pointlessly finished the summer homework of a me from another route.

"Shinobu, have you read Dragonball?"

"Aye."

"In the manga, Trunks comes from the future, right? To defeat the androids that are causing chaos in his world. But that's a parallel world, so no matter how successful he is at defeating the androids in the past, the future won't change. And Trunks says something like, 'I do it because I want there to be a world where the androids have been defeated'—which never really made sense to me when I was a kid," I said. Full of emotion. "But now I get it. How Trunks felt."

"Dost thou fancy thyself to be like Trunks? Thy self-opinion is wildly over-inflated." Shinobu looked disgusted. As ever, we just couldn't get on the same page—it seemed dicey to call me the Koyomi Araragi who successfully forged a positive relationship with Shinobu Oshino. "So, what wilt thou do?" she proceeded to ask.

"What will I do?"

"Though the Aloha brat's letter hast changed thy perspective somewhat, nothing else has. The energy at Kita-Shirahebi Shrine is exhausted, so 'tis true as ever that we cannot return to the past, nor to Route A. We have no choice but to live on in this timeline—in this world. That being the case, would it not have been better to obediently learn the means of survival from the lass instead of performing a cool exit?"

"…"

"We might also have been able to garner information regarding other survivors. She may even know aught of Miss Tsundere or the former class president, or of thy sisters, and the rest."

Hmm.

That hadn't occurred to me, but there was a good possibility.

Wouldn't that be great.

"But it's no good, Shinobu."

"No good…wherefore?"

"We have somewhere we have to be, remember? Miss Hachikuji said, 'If you've got nowhere to go' so it's no good."

"Somewhere to be, eh?" Shinobu shrugged her shoulders resignedly. "Thou meanest to go forth to save the world?"

"No. To save the girl."

That was always the plan.

So we had to.

That's what I always did.

This time too that was all there was to it.

Nothing special about it at all.

"I never thought I'd have to fight you again."

"Hnh nor that I would have survived. So a suicidal vampire changes classes into a failed-suicide vampire, eh? We shall simply have to finish the job for her."

"The you from another route… Neither Type A nor Type B, but Route X. Think we'll get along?"

"I disavow any me who could destroy the world in full knowledge of the flavor of Mister Donut."

"Maybe she didn't know. Maybe she didn't have any during Golden Week."

"Mayhap."

“If we can defeat the you in Route X, Oshino says everyone who’s been turned into a zombie will come back to life.”

“A convenient setup, indeed. Her suicide a failure, to say nothing of her failure in creating thralls… I can but hope to avert my eyes from the ineptitude of this route’s Kissshot.”

“But it’s thanks to that we’ve got any. Hope, I mean.”

“Mayhap.”

“And hasn’t the you in my shadow been failing all along, too? Come to think of it, when you made me into a vampire, you were really worried about me going into a frenzy.”

“I have never once failed.”

“This again… Incredible.”

“Precisely, I am incredible…though, aye, if all the zombies become human once more, thou canst do it, canst live on in place of the already-deceased Koyomi Araragi of this route. Thou canst even become close with the Miss Tsundere of this route, or the former class president of this route, and thy sisters of this route□”

“I can’t do that. I may look the same, but my personality is different, and the relationships with them were constructed by the Araragi of this route. I can’t just cut in and hijack them.”

“…”

“Hey, after we save the world, let’s you and me wander off somewhere, just the two of us.”

“Haha, an interesting proposition.”

“Will you help me?”

“I suppose ’tis unavoidable.”

Shinobu laughed□laughed gruesomely.

No. She laughed cheerfully, lightheartedly.

“I said we would die together, did I not?”

“…So you think we’ll die?”

“We have no hope of victory. I, an incomplete vampire, and thee, an incomplete human, such a two-man cell against a vampire at the height of her powers? Even if my vampiric level were raised to the limit, ’twould be vain. ’Tis as though we are challenging her with our legs tied together for a three-legged race.”

“I guess.”

Oshino’s letter said much the same thing.

So it was probably true.

It had to be true.

“But our battles have always been like that,” I reminded Shinobu. “You going to lose your nerve in the face of certain defeat?”

“…Hmm.”

“I’m not saying we should do it because Oshino asked us to. How can we let a route where it’s possible for Hachikuji to be alive be a route in which the world lies in ruins? Don’t you want the route where she’s alive to be a good one?”

“Aye, well, destroying the world simply by being alive… Who is she, Helen of Troy?”

“A full-tilt Helen of Troy.”

“’Tis most difficult for a single human to try and change the world, but perhaps ’tis not impossible to tilt it a bit.”

“I don’t know about playing tilt-a-world, but just about anybody can tilt a narrative.”

“A dandy tale, eh?”

“We’re the dandies here.”

“’Tis a bit affected.”

“I don’t deny it.”

“Kakak. Well, my lord, if thou must affect something, what wilt thou affect?”

“Good question. For the moment, I think I’ll try and tilt the world, after all, out of affection for the girl standing before me.”

“Ah, that weigh the life of a girl against the entire world and choose the girl thing, eh? How current.”

“Nah, it’s already played out.”

“Heheh.”

“We’re going to save the world, and we’re going to save the girl. Heroes these days are all about being that greedy.”

“Indeed.”

Now you’re talking, Shinobu approved, taking my hand in hers.

Our fingers entwined.

As though we were setting forth into a new world.

“If we are to die together□so much more whilst we live.”

“I like that.”

Now it was my turn to laugh lightheartedly.

Now I saw.

We really had forged a positive relationship□so far so good, and, I was pretty sure, it’d be good from here on out too.

All right then.

Time to fashion the here-on-out.

Time to fashion the future.

029

“Jiangshi.”

Day drew to a close—and that night.

Having ascended the mountain path we had traversed more times than I could count in the past few days, we found ourselves within the precincts of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine. We raised one another’s vampiric levels almost to the max and also produced four duplicates of the enchanted sword Kokorowatari so that we were armed to the teeth, carrying two blades apiece.

Shinobu hadn’t changed her body into a battle-ready form, choosing instead to remain a little girl. She stood at the ready, those massive enchanted swords, so incongruous with her physique, resting across her shoulders.

The zombie hordes didn’t come for us, probably because our vampiric level was elevated nearly as far as it would go—meaning our humanity was lowered nearly as far as it would go.

If we’d been in town they might have sensed us, but because we were at that unpopular shrine—and likely also because of the efficacy of that talisman affixed to the main hall, the grounds were peaceful.

Most effective of all, however, may have been the rice (brought up the mountain from the market in town) sprinkled all around us just in case.

Of course.

For extra insurance we could also bite the bullet and return Shinobu to full vampire status, if absolutely necessary—in which case Shinobu would regain her full power—or rather, in which case Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade would be restored in place

of Shinobu Oshino.

If we did that, we might be able to look forward to a fair fight—or maybe more than fair, given the additional presence of her true thrall, i.e. me. But though I suspect that plan occurred to her just as it did to me, neither of us spoke it aloud.

It wasn't a matter of trust.

It wasn't out of Shinobu's anxiety that she might turn on me if she regained her power—that anxiety was long gone.

Having read Oshino's letter.

We'd gotten past that.

For that very reason, however—we didn't want to alter our relationship as it stood now.

Our strange relationship where each of us was the other's master and slave.

In a certain sense, I prized that bond above life itself.

That was why.

Maybe it was a ridiculous thing to be hung up on, but it was ridiculously important to us.

We had no intention of putting it before the fate of the entire world, of course—in that case we'd just have to save the world.

"Aye, 'tis—a continental aberration. They differ from vampires and the like, who have been deprived of death from the start. They would best be termed 'living corpses.'"

"Jiangshi, yeah. I think they were pretty popular back in the day." That was my parents' generation, though, so I don't know much about it. "Ononoki and I were talking about all that. Anyway, if they're weak against rice, then that's probably what they are."

"They would never be able to attend a wedding."

“Since you mention it, vampires can’t handle crosses, either… I think I also remember hearing something about the girls being cute.”

“’Tis only Tenten, is it not?”

“Why do you even know about Tenten?”

But the strongest impression I have of them is not as “the resurrected dead,” but as the slaves of magical practitioners□seeing how they’d been restrained by the talisman made me think that maybe they were sort of like Ononoki, like a shikigami. And I had the impression that Tenten herself was a yugen doshi, who controlled such jiangshi.

Shinobu spoke as if they were distinct from zombies, and I pictured jiangshi as stiff, not limp like zombies.

“Aye, as though rigor mortis hath set in. Anyway, in most cases□the resurrection of the dead carries a price.”

“A price, huh?”

Having for the moment laid aside my dual enchanted swords, I was performing some careful stretches. This may have been unnecessary for a vampire body, which is to say, it was definitely unnecessary, but it was more about mood.

“Not that I was bringing back the dead, but if the price for saving Hachikuji was the ruination of the entire world, well, that sounds about right.”

“’Tis not a fair trade, though, in the end.”

“Yeah. I refuse to accept the idea that the world ended just because Hachikuji is alive. Even if fate decreed it.”

That made it seem…

Like she’s dispensable, like the world doesn’t need her□bullshit.

Whether dead or alive.

Child or adult.

“The world isn’t the same without her.”

Aye, Shinobu agreed. Finishing up her dual-wield practice swings, she said, “I am ready. The time is ripe, now is the moment. Shall we call forth our accursed foe?”

“You do the honors.”

Without any particular cue.

Abandoning any thought of turning back, abandoning all else Shinobu drew a great breath and cried to the heavens like a bullhorn.

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!”

The volume was deafening, but I didn’t block my ears because the moment that cry was loosed, the battle had already begun.

It was a sort of signal like the fireworks in the park, or rather a sign saying: Here We Are.

Like bats using ultrasonic waves to determine one another’s

location—it was a message demarcating the boundaries of a vampire's turf.

If, as Oshino said, the other Shinobu was still alive in this world—there was no way she could ignore a signal pattern identical to her own. She would come.

It might also draw out the zombie hordes—but they were slow, so she, a genuine vampire, would arrive first.

"…Now we can neither run nor hide," Shinobu announced once the signal cry had ended. Seeming a little bit out of breath, she returned to my side.

"I have no intention of running or hiding."

"Then what dost thou intend to do?"

"A little something I like to call, 'not having a plan.'"

"Keheh."

'Tis just like thee, Shinobu said.

Well, she was probably right.

But it wasn't death before dishonor or anything; I wasn't set on throwing my life away in a suicide attack.

I intended to win.

"Even at the height of your powers these enchanted swords will deal you damage, right?"

"So I trust. Yet at the height of my powers, I am given to ignore all common sense. The unforeseen possibilities are legion." Shinobu looked over my two katanas, comparing them to her own—since they were replicas that she herself had produced, I doubted even she could tell them apart. "In the face of the Kokorowatari I wield at the height of my powers, even this series of enchanted swords amounts to naught but toys."

“In that case, we’ve got no choice but to find the chink in her armor.”

The strong are also careless, I proffered a strategy that wasn’t much of a strategy at all.

“If her armor has such a chink,” Shinobu warned. “Even I would be on my strictest guard after hearing a boundary marker identical to mine own.”

“Hmm. A you who isn’t careless is going to be unstoppable… In which case, what do we do? We’re invulnerable like her, and yet…” It was also true that “invulnerable” meant something quite different for us and for a fully powered Shinobu.

“If we have any chance of victory, it lies in the fact that the me of this world seems to have crossed the line into madness.”

“That’s actually helpful?”

“Aye. Though, of course, it may also be our downfall□but an insane me will likely be plumbing the depths of despair. Her failed suicide attempt doth not change the fact that even now she remains a potential suicide.”

Hmm.

A potential suicide plumbing the pits of pathos and paranoia?

Somehow that sounded even more frightening.

“At any rate, I wonder what happened to Oshino after he formed a scrum with Kagenui or Kaiki for their final suicide attack? After he entrusted that letter to Miss Hachikuji. What if he was victorious in his final battle? We’d look like total idiots.”

“With those zombies still about, ’tis unlikely he was victorious outright.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Methinks a little rice shower will not serve against 6.5 billion

zombies. As his letter said, a final suicide attack would likely fail—we can but pray that he hath not yet found the me of this world."

"And if he has, then he's become a zombie?"

"There is also the possibility that he has simply been slain."

"I can't stand that possibility. Even Kaiki's death would weigh heavy on my conscience."

Though even death probably couldn't make an honest man out of that swindler.

While it may seem like we were strategizing right up to the end, what we were engaging in, right up to the end, was in fact small talk.

That, too, was—just like me.

Like us.

"Keheh."

"Hahaha."

"Heheh."

"Heehee."

At last we were just laughing, about nothing in particular.

And then—the moment arrived.

She arrived.

Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade arrived on the battlefield.

"…Urk!"

Her very being lay beyond the ken of humans.

I had no clue what kind of entrance she would make—and figured

that dropping from the sky with the speed of a meteorite was probably more or less her standard practice.

Or maybe she'd float down on the wings sprouting from her back, silhouetted against the moon. Or, using her vampiric ability to transform her body into mist, she might appear before our eyes even more casually and suddenly than the zombies had. I wouldn't have been particularly surprised if she burst forth from the earth.

I could even conceive of some unexpected, grotesque entrance where she devoured her way out of our innards.

Well, however she did it, the one thing I couldn't imagine, given my understanding of her character, was a surprise attack that might in any way be perceived as cowardly, so in that sense, at least, we could maybe relax a little.

Thus, while we were on our guard, we were also looking forward to a show, immodestly enough.

Wondering just what kind of colorful entrance Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade might make in the full glory of her power.

However her entrance.

Utterly betrayed every one of our predictions and expectations.

Betrayed in a bad sense.

She the aberration slayer, the legendary vampire who had brought the entire world to ruin came on stage in the most literally pedestrian manner possible, climbing the steps of the mountain path just as we had done.

The zombies certainly had the edge on her in terms of the element of surprise.

She walked under the torii and onto the shrine grounds.

Her appearance, though, sufficed to leave us speechless.

“Urk…”

“Hmph.”

While I could do nothing but groan, Shinobu nodded with understanding even as she covered her mouth in horror.

Nodded at the miserable sight of herself as she was in this route.

Her entire body horribly burned.

Giving off the stench of corruption and dragging one leg behind her.

More zombie-like than the zombies.

More corpse-like than the corpses.

Seeing herself in that state, Shinobu nodded.

“So ’twas self-immolation I chose, after all.”

The same as him.

The same, Shinobu repeated.

“Him” her aforementioned first thrall?

The thrall who, despairing of himself after only a few years as a vampire, chose suicide?

Had to be.

I’m fairly certain he abandoned his body to the sunlight, committing suicide by self-immolation.

His suicide, however, had been successful.

The Shinobu no, the Kissshot who stood before me now must have tried the same thing.

To follow him into oblivion, after assuring herself that the destruction of the human race was complete as he had, so too did

she surrender herself to the sun.

Then failed.

Her entire body was horribly burned, leaving her barely a shadow of her former self.

She failed to die.

And.

“…What a wretched creature,” Shinobu spoke beside me. In a poignant voice. “To go so far and yet not perish, such a foolish variety of immortality do we enjoy□and yet ’tis precisely what she deserves. To be reduced to this despite knowing thee□despite having encountered thee…”

’Tis naught but failure, she condemned.

I wondered if she was speaking to me, but as far as I could tell from her expression, she seemed to be speaking to herself.

It was too sad a soliloquy.

Too painful.

To share with me.

“Wherefore think to die□this me?”

“Ha.”

Kissshot finally emitted a sound.

At first I didn’t know what it was.

Maybe she couldn’t vocalize properly because her throat was half burned? I thought that was it, but then the guttural rumblings continued□and I remembered.

I remembered that it was her laughter.

Kissshot’s.

Guffaw.

“Ha”Ha”Ha”

“…”

“Ha!”Haha!”Hahaha!”Hahahaha!”Hahahahaha!”Hahahahahaha!”Hahahaha

Even with half her body burned away—even having failed to die.

Even as a potential suicide, even as a failed suicide.

Even after everything that had gone wrong.

Even then she laughed heartily.

And gruesomely.

The iron-blooded, hot-blooded, yet cold-blooded vampire—Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.

In her helpless immortality.

Made every inch a monster—her final, ultimate beauty.

Neither I, nor even Shinobu, could get a word in edgewise in the face of that guffaw—we couldn’t even move a muscle.

Right.

Even in that state—a failed suicide, her lover’s pact unfulfilled, half her body paralyzed, even then Kissshot was the mightiest presence in the world.

Even in that state—she was not the slightest bit enfeebled.

Even on the brink of death, her entire body horribly burned, neither I nor Shinobu, nor Oshino or Kagenui—no mere “human” could stand up to this aberration.

This monstrosity.

The aberration slayer and king of the night, the bane of all and

sundry.

In part we were overwhelmed by that resonant laughter—but in any case, we wouldn't have been able to move a muscle.

Doing it through sheer willpower.

Making up for it with your fighting spirit.

I could feel in my bones that such boys' manga thinking would get us nowhere. Such was the disparity between us—and suddenly my hands, each holding a Kokorowatari, felt useless.

To the point that if I didn't grip the hilts so tightly that my hands bled—I might lose those trump cards then and there.

It took me back, to the beginning.

And then I realized.

I finally understood.

Just how much consideration she'd shown me when, that time over spring break, we fought to the death—

"Ha!"Haha!"Hahaha!"Hahahaha!"Hahahahaha!"Hahahahahaha!"Hahahaha she said.

Finally uttering something resembling a word.

"Then…'twas possible. Such a future. Such a world. Such a route—'twas really possible, that I and thou would lean on one another."

Laughing as she said this—she wept.

Like that time over spring break.

Shedding bitter, red tears—she wept.

"Keheh—what a comedy of errors. 'Twas possible, and yet—I spoiled everything, with my worthless jealousies. Thou wert lost to me when I absconded from the cram school, and I felt like a bird with

but one wing, half my body plucked away. But…'twas never so poignant as this. As being confronted with the possibility."

"…"

"Then□that disagreeable Aloha brat was right all along. As though he can see through everything□how ludicrous. Were it not so?"

The two of thee?

Turning upon us a gaze flooded with red tears, her eyeballs melting into cloudy murk, she addressed us directly for the first time.

She, who could kill us without so much as lifting a pinky□instead of killing us, with her face still drawn into a rictus, asked us that question.

"'Twere."

It was Shinobu who answered.

She'd asked the question, and it was she who answered.

"Thou art quite the clown. A most amusing tale, indeed. Look at thyself□unable to die, even now. Even immortality hath its limits□this is what they mean by not knowing when to give up the ghost. This failed death. I say unto thee, the difference between us is not so great as ye might think. 'Tis a matter of only the slightest difference in the relationships we weave with those around us□"

Hachikuji being alive.

Hachikuji being gone.

"□And the conditions were not so different. For myself, the difference was not insurmountable. With just a touch of compromise on our part. If thou hadst opened thy heart just a little more to this man□trusted him, put thyself in his hands, ye might have been the same as I. History would have corrected for it. To put it plainly, I cannot for the life of me understand why thou didst fail."

“…Haha. Tickles me to hear. For I cannot for the life of me understand thy success.”

I want the strategy guide.

So saying, Kissshot sat down on the spot—or rather than sit down, she more or less collapsed there on the grounds of Kita-Shirahebi Shrine.

Exhibiting no inkling of weakness.

But her crimson tears—had ceased.

“Myself from another world. And—my servant from another world.” With her eyes riveted on us, she said, “I shall return ye curs to thine own world.”

“…Huh?”

For a moment I couldn’t comprehend what she’d said.

Neither of us could.

And wait, how did Kissshot know right off the bat that we were travelers from another route—Shinobu and I were obviously familiar figures to her, but there was no way she could have perceived the truth in the blink of an eye.

I’m sorry to say it, but I don’t think she was endowed with such powers of deduction.

So how—in the same instant my question began to form, I guessed the answer.

It was Oshino.

Mèmè Oshino.

Eleven years ago, in the course of collecting tales of aberrations, Oshino had happened upon the urban legend about me and Shinobu—in other words, sometime around April or May, he’d become aware of the possibility that we were from another route.

And if he made some inferences from that.

And hinted at them—to her, while they were cohabitating in the ruins of the abandoned cram school—

About the whole route concept.

If at that point he'd told her about the existence of parallel worlds.

Though of course, even if he did, it probably went in one ear and out the other—because if she'd been attentive, the world wouldn't have fallen into this state.

But actually seeing us.

Together like this.

When she, when Kissshot, saw Shinobu Oshino and Koyomi Araragi working together—it must have dawned on her.

And.

In a flash she must have put it all together.

Because this sight, of herself in someone else's company, was what she'd sought for centuries—

"Return us to our own world… What dost thou mean?"

With no attempt to hide her suspicion, Shinobu glared back at herself.

In a sense, it was an appallingly tone-deaf response.

She wasn't even trying to understand what was in the other party's heart—though her interlocutor was herself, in this other world she was someone else, a stranger.

You're not supposed to meet yourself, either in the world of the past or the world of the future—which is why I'd been careful not to meet myself eleven years ago—but now.

What did they see? What were they thinking?

How incompatible are two different selves?

“What, dost thou mean to stay in this ruined in this world that I have ruined? If ’tis possible, dost thou not wish to return, to thine own world?” demanded Kissshot as though she were sounding us out.

“Aye yet there is not sufficient energy for such.”

“If there were, wouldst thou wish to go?” the legendary vampire threw back in response. “If I consume, for instance, all my would-be thralls, my misbegotten thralls who now run rampant in this town, the resultant energy may be sufficient.”

“Thou speakest nonsense. ’Tis exactly why thou didst fail. Those zombies were once the residents of this town. Humans. Convert them not into energy.”

“Convert not humans into energy.”

“Never.”

“’Tis most unlike me.”

“’Tis most like this me.”

“Then convert me,” Kissshot shot back, placing the palm of her hand on her own chest. “The spiritual energy thou couldst derive from Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade herself in her full glory, even though I be on the brink of death, should suffice for a journey to another route.”

Not just suffice if we spent that much energy, we’d have change coming to us.

This time, I really did let the two enchanted blades fall from my hands.

Of course.

In his letter, Oshino did make the over-the-top request that I save the world but not once did he, in a single line or word, ask me to

defeat Kissshot.

He wasn't counting on me to accomplish anything so ambitious.

Facing her like this.

Showing ourselves to her, was enough.

That was all it took to save her.

To save the world.

The girl standing there in front of me had also meant the six hundred-year-old Kissshot.

If Oshino could see us, me and Shinobu wielding four deadly, enchanted great katana, could see us prepared for a violent end, no doubt he'd say:

You're awfully spirited today. Something good happen to you? and at least.

Something good did happen to her.

And so.

And so also to us.

"Convert thee into spiritual energy by which thou meanest, drink thy blood."

"Aye, needless to say, 'tis precisely my meaning."

"And needless to say, thou wilt die."

"Needless to say, I might as well be dead."

"I see."

That was all.

That was the extent of the conversation between Shinobu Oshino and Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade they probably didn't

really understand one another.

In the end they were selves from different worlds, different people, strangers.

No way they'd understand or get through to one another.

And yet. And so.

They had no use for needless chatter.

I accompanied Shinobu as she approached Kissshot—and as we got close.

"Hearken to me, o my servant from another route…"

Kissshot spoke to me.

"This is no contract I propose, nor is it a bargaining chip, but merely a request—might ye not stroke my head?"

"Gladly," I answered immediately and placed my hand on her head.

Tousling her hair.

Though her entire body was melting like mud, her golden hair was still soft and pleasant to the touch—and as I mussed it around, her expression, which had been unremittingly grim, at last softened into one of joy.

Even when Shinobu sank her teeth into her neck, that expression didn't change.

And so ended that summer's adventure.

I think it taught me a hell of a lot more than any summer homework.

030

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch line of this story.

The next day, apparently not even the experts, my little sisters Karen and Tsukihi, could rouse me from my slumber as I lay toppled over on the steps leading down from Kita-Shirahebi Shrine, and I awakened lazily from the sunshine.

“Art thou up, my lord?”

“…Yeah. You been waiting long?”

“I too have only just awakened.”

It almost sounded like we were meeting for a date.

Come to think of it, it was kind of like a date.

Shinobu had allowed me to pillow my head in her lap.

The lap pillow I’d always longed for.

They were the thighs of a little girl, not particularly plump, and I can’t say they performed all that well as a pillow, so I just won’t say anything at all.

It’s more about the overall feeling, anyway.

Checking the date on my cell phone, I saw that it was Monday, August twenty-first. The first day of the new term. The day of the opening ceremony.

“Did we really make it back this time? Or…” I looked up the stairs towards the shrine and started to get up. “Maybe it was all a dream. Maybe when you convinced me to jump through the torii that night, I fell down the stairs and was out cold till morning.”

“Must we renew that debate?”

“Ah! It was all a dream!”

“Thou shalt piss off Osamu Tezuka.”

“Wait, did Tezuka really come out against it? Because I think the ‘it was all a dream’ ending is actually decent. If he did, maybe it was in a Knox’s Ten Commandments kind of way?”

“Presume not upon the master’s largesse.”

“Huh? Did we all have the same dream?”

“Speak not such tired lines.”

“Weird, I don’t remember what I dreamed, but somehow I feel like crying…”

“Speak not such exhausted lines.”

“Huh? What’s this pendant? I feel like I’ve forgotten something important…”

“Didst thy character also feminize?”

It wouldn’t actually be all that strange for me and Shinobu to have the same dream, though, come to think of it. “I do wonder what happened to that dream world. I guess we’ll never know. I hope everyone was revived okay…that’s to say, I hope they became human again.”

“Not everyone, I should think. There must have been many who were caught up in the panic and slain before they could become aberrations above all, thou, who didst perish before my frenzy, would not return to life.”

“Well, so be it.”

“Mm?”

“We decided to die together, remember? There may have been a

two-month time lag in the ‘together’ part, but that route’s Araragi died along with you, so his wish was granted.”

“And of course so was mine,” Shinobu said sulkily, sounding that much more sincere.

“My only real regret is that if Senjogahara and Hanekawa, and my sisters, became human again, they would grieve for my death.”

“Who knows, they might attempt to resurrect thee using arcane methods.”

“That’d be a whole other story, an intense one…”

Another tale.

But that’s got nothing to do with me.

That route has its own battles to fight.

I’ve just got to do my best to make sure nothing like that happens in my route.

Standing up, I brushed away the dirt that was covering me from head to toe.

For the trip back through the torii I had changed from the yukata into my original clothes, which had been pretty filthy to begin with.

Laundry would be my first priority when I got home.

That and a bath.

“…Hm? When I get home? Hang on, I was minding just the date, but…Shinobu, what time is it?!”

“Hm, shall I tell thee according to the twelve-hour system or the twenty-four-hour system?”

“Either one is fine!”

“Hast thou not learned that ‘either one is fine’ strays far from the truth? Thine every choice dictates the future.”

“Don’t give me that moral lesson crap! Just tell me the goddamn time already!”

“Hold thy horses, I shall construct a sundial.”

“You’ve got my watch around your wrist, just give it back!”

“Nay, ’tis not yet adjusted to this age, so it shall be of no use at present.”

“Say that first!”

Someone just give me the time of day without taking so much time!

I wasn’t getting anywhere, so I took out my cell phone again.

The battery was about to die.

And with its dying breath, it was trying to tell me□

“…Oh no. The opening ceremony’s started already.”

What to do?

Even if I stopped by my house and dashed to school at top speed, the ceremony would already have ended, and homeroom would probably be over as well.

I was going to be tardy after all.

Hanekawa and Senjogahara were going to yell at me.

They might kill me.

They might make me an ex-person.

“Ye must needs take great pains that such doth not occur, my lord□for if thou were to die, knowest all too well that I may destroy the world. Take great pains to be as circumspect as possible in thy battles from now on,” Shinobu reinforced my own earlier resolve as she sank into my shadow.

It seemed like she hadn’t “just” woken up like we were meeting for

a date□she probably meant to sleep in earnest now.

“Oh boy… This truly was like a midsummer night’s dream.”

Not that I’ve ever read it.

Truly? Pfft.

Bandying about such fripperies, I descended the steps alone□wondering what I would do if the world I found below lay in ruins.

Or if it was a completely different world even if it wasn’t in ruins… If we’d failed again and ended up on another totally different route… Hmmm.

It was totally possible.

In which case, having used up all the energy available for traveling to other routes, this time for sure, we’d have no choice but to live out our lives along a different route… I felt that it would be a little too convenient if, after all the problems plaguing our trips through time, the homeward journey alone went off without a hitch. It wouldn’t be so strange if there were one or two problems in reserve, it might even be proper…

Hmmm.

Based on the number of pages remaining, I figure everything will be fine, but maybe it’s just an intermission. I just want to avoid a surreal twist like in that famous sci-fi movie.

Seriously, I’ve had it up to here with losing my way, and□

“Misterrr Araragiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!”

Having reached the foot of the mountain, I found that my bicycle was locked up just fine where I’d left it. But as I was unlocking it, a small glob barreled into my back like a truck.

And when I say a small glob, I mean a young lady.

A young lady with pigtails.

“I’ve been looking for you, Mister Araragi! I started with your house, and I’ve been searching the whole town for you since quite early this morning, but I wasn’t able to find you, so I was worried that you’d gone away to another dimension or something! Oh, I’m so glad that you’re all right! Let me hold you a little longer, let me touch you a little longer, let me lick you a little longer!”

“This is a different route!!”

I pushed away the young lady behind me, by which I mean the fake Hachikuji.

Gaaaah!

An absurdist ending!

Now I’ll never get back to my own world!

“Huh? Different route? Fake Hachikuji? What are you talking about, Mister Araragi? Has this heat finally melted your brain?”

“My head isn’t made of Häagen-Dazs, you know. Don’t lump me in with Chocolate Fondant.”

“Shall I lump you in with Pumpkin?”

“What’s the scoop with everyone always mentioning limited-time-only flavors?”

“Fine, then your melty condition reminds me of a zombie.”

“How about you just don’t lump me in with anything.”

“On a whim I try to deliver big time on the service we’ve always talked about, and this is the thankless reception I get.”

Hachikuji, having fallen flat on her ass when I pushed her away, stood up as though none of this was going according to plan. I was thinking that her movements seemed somehow quicker than usual until I realized that this Hachikuji wasn’t wearing a backpack.

I know it sounds like I'm playing Spot the Difference here, but did it mean this young lady was an imposter, after all?

"No, no, no, that's just it, Mister Araragi. I left my backpack in your room yesterday. So I've been racing around all over the place since early this morning trying to get it back before you look inside it."

"You don't trust me an inch, do you?"

For crying out loud, I hadn't looked.

Wait…

Yesterday, huh?

That would jibe with being back where I started from, at least chronologically speaking it remained to be seen if this world was the same route I've walked, and known, and grown up in.

Thanks to Hachikuji's unthinkable entrance, I wasn't so sure…

"Well," she said, "when it comes to being hugged, I've learned today that if I'm the one who does the hugging at my own convenience, the contents of my skirt won't be imperiled, at least."

Hachikuji seemed pretty satisfied with herself as she made this scandalous pronouncement.

What a pain in the ass.

It was proving unexpectedly difficult to determine her authenticity.

Was this Hachikuji the real McCoy, or a fake Mayoi?

"Hey, Hachikuji. Do you love me?"

"Huh? Not likely. In fact I hate you."

"It is a different route! A parallel world!"

"Huh? What's parallel is the inside of your head."

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

“I’m talking about your rallerallellellelpappara head.”

“I still don’t know what that means, but somehow it makes sense! The only thing you can express clearly is malice!”

“By the way, Mister Parallegi.”

“Don’t be mispronouncing my name after the conversation we just had! You’re making me seem like the imposter here! I’m sick of your half-assed slips of the tongue, my name is Araragi!”

“My apologies. It was a slip of the tongue.”

“No, it wasn’t, you did it on purpose…”

“I slipped you the tongue.”

“Not on purpose?!”

“Slung.”

“An abbreviation?! For ‘slip of the tongue’? It doesn’t make it sound like an honest mistake at all! You’ll never be a voice actor!”

“You don’t think it’d catch on? Sluuung.”

“You’d never get a callback after your first audition.”

And with that back and forth.

I now felt confident that I was back in my own world□that this was Route A.

Yup, no question.

There couldn’t be many routes where Hachikuji was blessed with such polished skills.

This Hachikuji.

She was the Mayoi Hachikuji born of months of bantering with yours truly.

I could make that statement without reservation.

Just as I wouldn't be who I am now if it weren't for Hachikuji if it weren't for me, this Hachikuji wouldn't be who she was.

"What are you grinning about? It's creepy," she complained.

"Nothing… Anyway, back to your backpack. I'd been looking for you to give it back, actually. So let's head to my place together and get it. Can you ride behind me on my bike?"

"I don't want to ride with you, Mister Araragi."

"Hachikuji, just this once don't act like you hate me. It makes me doubt that this is the right route."

"You can't silence me with such a preposterous excuse…"

"I've just returned from a pretty huge adventure, so I'd like to ride my bike if possible."

"A huge adventure… How could you go on one without me, Mister Araragi?"

"I didn't. You were there."

"Huh? What are you talking about? I never imagined I wouldn't get invited to the party, what with me on the cover and everything. I had to lie to Miss Hanekawa just now."

"Oh, that reminds me. Hachikuji, before I forget."

"Yes?"

"Up until now, I've been saying that this is the best you're ever going to look, but you're still doing surprisingly well past twenty."

"What a rude thing to say!"

"You've never wanted to come back to life?"

"Never. Pretty soon I will have been dead longer than I was alive."

“Hmm, I guess that’s life.”

“That’s life.”

“But if someone with psychic powers or something showed up and said they could revive you as a jiangshi, what would you do?”

“I would hate to come back as a jiangshi. Thank you, but no thank you.”

“Okay, what if it wasn’t as a jiangshi?”

“Thank you, but it’s still no thank you.”

“How come?”

“Just because. If someone told you that you could become human again, you wouldn’t do it either, would you?”

“No, I guess not. Well, we’re in the same boat then.”

“The same.”

“So, are you happy as a ghost?”

“I’m unhappy about turning into a ghost. But I’m happy to have met you.”

“…”

“So overall, I’m happy. I wasn’t able to see my mother while I was alive, but because I died with that regret, I got to meet you.”

“…Right. We did get to meet.”

In the end, Hachikuji and I didn’t ride together on my bike. In compliance with regulations we walked instead, and I pushed the bike along beside her, matching her pace. We engaged in our usual stupid banter, and every once in a while I looked over my shoulder, took a wrong turn, or got a little lost, but putting one foot solidly in front of the other, and facing ahead, we continued to walk.

This route.

Afterword

I think everyone has “that experience,” one so traumatic that they would rather die than go through it again□probably more than one□but the funny thing is that those abominable, traumatic experiences are what make us who we are. In other words, it wouldn’t make our lives run more smoothly if we went back to the past and removed those traumatic experiences. Just the opposite, in fact. A life without trauma is insipid, with more horrible experiences in the present progressive tense than in the past tense. Though that would be traumatic itself, so in the end I suppose it would amount to the same thing. But for some reason I feel like it’s better to undergo the trauma when you’re a child. Maybe “trauma” is a bit much, but isn’t some level of stress, at least, indispensable to living a healthy life? That said, we all want to live with as few unpleasant memories as possible, but, but, even if we don’t intentionally try to experience trauma or take on stress, the world doesn’t turn at our convenience, so in avoiding one thing, we run up against another. Why is that, I wonder? When one says that the present is an aggregation of the past, and the future is linked to the present, it makes it sound like the past and the future are both extremely valuable things, but the past isn’t much to speak of, and living for the future is a difficult proposition. So what of the present? Well, it’s stuck between the rock and the hard place of past and future, or, I guess you could say it maintains the image of a kind of middle manager, bound to the past while sucking up to the future. For that very reason, we barely manage to power through under the illusion that all of our current troubles are shaping our future selves, but can you really call that a life? I have no idea.

Will this book become the second episode of Season Two of MONOGATARI? Again, I have no idea. But, the content is pretty different from what I had announced at some point previously, I think, and for that I apologize. I had actually wanted to change the subtitle to “Mayoi Zombie,” but it ended up being too late. I’ll

divulge here that this book is the result of repeated trial and error in an attempt to see if I could somehow actually write a novel featuring only little girls in addition to our young friend Araragi. Schedule-wise, it was grueling, let me tell you. I'll be delighted if that trauma helps to shape my future self, but doing the impossible once just turns it into plain old possible, so I'm in serious trouble. A trauma to look forward to? And so this has been KABUKIMONOGATARI Chapter Idle, "Mayoi Jiangshi," a novel written a hundred percent under the gun.

The front cover represents Mayoi's first appearance in color.* Thank you very much, VOFAN. To all my readers, thank you so much for taking the time to read this book. And incidentally, the last scene of the book continues directly into the next one, HANAMONOGATARI, without a break. For the author or for the characters.

* Editor's Note: The art that has been included as an insert for this translation. Likewise, the illustration behind the frontispiece in BAKEMONOGATARI Part One, which did not feature Hachikuji, was used for the original first volume.

NISIOISIN

KABUKIMONOGATARI

KODANSHA COMICS Digital Edition

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